

Draft for course management

“Golf is a game of misses. He who misses best, wins.”

Ben Hogan

You've probably heard the phrase, “golf isn't a game of perfect”, or “there's no pictures on the scorecard”. A good score doesn't come from stringing together lots of great drives and amazing approach shots. That's how a *great* score is born.

A good score comes from managing your way around the golf course. Giving yourself the best opportunity to play to your strengths, whilst steering away from danger should you hit the ball a little fat or experience a wayward drive.

This is called course management, or having a golfing strategy.

Don't you hate it when you waste shots on the golf course from poor decision-making?

For example, let's say you have a 188 yard approach into the green of a tough, long par 4. The pin is tucked back left and you normally play a cut shot. Everything about the shot feels uncomfortable.

The rational side of your mind says, “*Aim at the middle of the green, play your cut, and be happy with the middle of the green.*” But then the emotional side of your mind comes in and says, “*Play a draw so you can hit it close*”... Knowing full well that 188 yard is far from a “go zone.”

Nothing about the shot inspires confidence but you're feeling good and decide to hit a draw to “get it close.” Over the ball you feel the doubt and indecision with your shot shape.

You put an uncommitted swing on it from playing too aggressively and have to scramble to save par (or bogey). Ten seconds later, you're fuming mad and say to yourself, “*Why didn't I just hit it in the middle of the green?*”

Trust me, I've been there more times than I can count. There's nothing worse than making simple course management mistakes that lead to costly bogeys and doubles.

About scoring better.

Scoring used to be full of cliché and anecdote until data came out to solve the problem.

How to score by understanding a few simple realities.

1. The absolute size of anyone's shot pattern is vastly different than you would believe.
2. It's easier to avoid bogey (or double bogey) than it is to make birdie.
2 (a). Your score will drop more by avoiding bogey (or double bogey) than making more birdies at EVERY LEVEL of the game.
3. Speed control is by far the most important aspect of great putting.
4. Shaping the driver one direction is how you avoid double crosses.
4 (a). Avoiding double crosses is the easiest way to avoid big numbers.

My belief is that for almost everyone, excepting only the super elite player, our focus should be on the things that will help us avoid bogeys and worse, and not the things that will give us an extra birdie or two per round. Why?

1. If you are a mid to high handicap golfer it's because you make too many bogeys and worse, not because you need to make 6 more birdies per round. No one makes enough birdies to bring the average handicap golfer down to scratch.
2. It's easier to turn a bogey into a par than it is to turn a par into a birdie. That's why even the best golfers in the world make a lot more pars than birdies.
3. The skills necessary to make a lot more birdies, hit the ball a lot longer, hit the mid irons close, hit the short irons really close, are harder to develop than the skills necessary to make fewer bogeys, keep your drive in play, chip it close, don't three putt so much.
4. You only have so much time to work on your game. Spend it where it is likely to produce the most result.
5. Plan your strategy according to your ability. Less than 1% of all golfers have shot an even par round of golf or better. Measuring your performance against par is a set-up for failure for the average golfer. Decide which holes you can par and which you can bogey, etc. and set your own par on each hole.

Below are five topics to start playing more like a **smart golfer**.

1. Stop Trying to Make Birdies

Golf is not about making more birdies... it's about making fewer bogeys. The easiest way to avoid pointless bogeys is by not short siding yourself on approach shots.

If you do miss the green, it's important to miss away from the pin for an easier chip. As Tiger and other professional golfers like to say, "good misses."

When you miss on the correct side of the hole and don't play overly aggressively, you don't invite big numbers on your scorecard.

2. Play One Shot Shape

If you're like most golfers, you probably try to shape shots based on the fairway or pin location.

For example, I used to try to hit a draw on holes that would dogleg to the left, despite normally hitting a cut off the tee. Sometimes it worked out but more often than not my drive was out of position as it wasn't my natural swing.

As I wish to point out inside this discussion, 99.9% of golfers would benefit from playing one shot shape, especially off the tee... regardless of the hole layout. [The additional question is which club should you be using on your tee shot?](#)

Once established it worked wonders for my game. It absolutely helped me understand my swing better and essentially eliminated one side of the golf course by playing the same shot over and over.

Plus, changing shot shapes with driver is hard. Since you can't adjust ball position (well, shouldn't adjust ball position), you have to manipulate your swing. This can lead to a lot of uncommitted swings and two-way misses.

3. Aim for the Middle of the Green More Often

Aiming at the middle of the green is boring and not very sexy... but it's how you shoot lower scores quickly. Once you learn the data, it becomes evident why aiming at most pins is a bad idea unless you have a wedge in hand.

Here's a good rule for average golfers, anything outside 120 yards, aim for the middle of the green. I can almost guarantee that you will have more greens in regulation and when you do miss, have easier up and downs.

But when you do have shorter distances, it's time to aim for the flag or closer to it. With practice you will be able to understand approach shot strategy in regards to your favorite distances and club selection.

4. Expect Shot Dispersion

One of the craziest facts I learned is how big the shot dispersion is with a driver. I refer to Pro Jason Day during the 2014 PGA Tour season; at the time, he was #1 in strokes gained off the tee. **Yet, he had a 74-yard shot dispersion with his driver...** and he was the top-ranked pro when it came to hitting tee balls.

Needless to say, you are going to hit a lot of shots right and left of your intended target. If the pros can't hit it dead straight every time, neither will you. Expect this and plan accordingly when hitting the driver.

If you don't have a 60-yard target (from rough to rough), **you probably shouldn't hit a driver.** He also has a great decision tree that makes it clear when to hit the driver and when to dial back to 3-wood or hybrid.

5. Stop Wasting Shots from the Trees

Lastly is how to manage your game when you get into trouble.

Most golfers, especially amateurs, try to make magic from the trees or other trouble. While they might pull the shot off occasionally, most times it leads to double bogeys or worse.

My demonstrations can make it easy to see why you should get the ball back in play and how to navigate trouble.

The fastest way to lower your scores The average golfer wastes 5-7 shots per round simply due to poor course management. There are simple rules to course management that all players can implement instantly to lower their scores.

The biggest hurdle is being disciplined enough to stick to your strategy when on the golf course. PGA Tour professionals hit less than 5 perfect shots per round. Why does the average golfer get so frustrated and stray away from their game plan when they hit one bad shot? **Be disciplined!**

Rules of course management

1. Golf is a game of misses. We don't strike the ball as nicely on the golf course as we do at the driving range. Quit trying to be perfect!
1. **Knowing your club distance and dispersion.** There are a few things that I have found in my own game, that you may also be facing when it comes to knowing how far you hit each club.
2. We all believe we hit the ball farther than we actually do. Carry distance is more constant a number than total distance. How far does each club in your bag go? If you are immediately thinking about your overall distances as opposed to your carry yardages, you are making a big mistake. Carry numbers are the only ones you need – the overall number depends on ground conditions that you can't control.
3. Pick a safe target on every shot (right or left of the target, short or long). Most golf courses give us a safe side to miss it to. Find a safe target – safe side of the fairway or green. When faced with a situation where you can't play short of, or carry such hazards, use your natural shot shape to play to the safer side of the fairway.
4. Match your distance from the center to the back of the green and match your club selection with your average results NOT your best.
5. Having a course guide as well as using a GPS for every golf course you play.
6. Factor in the elements – wind, uphill/downhill, lie
7. Never hit a shot if there is doubt in your mind. Commit 100%
8. Mentally rehearse the shot in your head before hitting it
9. Pre-shot routine is your sole focus when on the golf course – NOT making a perfect golf swing
10. Trust your practice and ability to execute.

Other important concepts for improved course management

Have a 'trusty' go-to longer club

Having a longer fairway shot that you trust can be valuable, because these are some of the most difficult shots in golf for recreational golfers.

Lay up to your favorite yardage

Most golfers have approach distances they prefer and other distances they do not. This can always be a helpful part of your course management. Subtract your desired distance from your total distance to help you to choose your proper club to hit when playing short. Are you more confident at 120 yards or 80 yards? Having worked on your distances, you should know what your favourite wedge shot is.

Pick a yardage (around the 100-yard mark) and practise to become as good from that number as possible. Every practice session, devote at least 15 minutes to hitting pitch shots from your favourite yardage – your confidence and scoring potential are guaranteed to improve.

Play the percentages into the green

Hitting greens in regulation, or **at least in regulation relative to your handicap**, can certainly help to lower scores. Look for the path of least resistance when approaching the green.

Stress-free putting

Total putts is one of the leading indicators of successful golf as it reflect putting prowess but also other parts of the game as well. The recreational golfer often loses many strokes to three-putts. Distance control in putting is a necessary part of becoming a successful golfer and the extra benefit, is golf balls that are slowing down around the cup are more likely to fall in the sides as they lose momentum.

If you have not been as successful with distance control as you might like, calibrating your putting and associating a stroke size with a distance can be helpful.

Learn to hit knockdowns

The days that your swing is working well and you hit most of your shots solidly are certainly a lot of fun. But what happens when you aren't having one of those easy days? Having a plan-B shot, like a knockdown, can help to keep you calm

and give you "an out" until you can determine what fundamental issue may be causing your troubles.

Tips for hitting proper knockdown shots

1. Take more club
2. Grip down on the handle
3. Play the ball slightly back in stance
4. Drop back foot back slightly to realign shoulders and keep weight on forward foot
5. Take a slightly smaller swing back and through as arms and torso work together throughout the motion

Small strokes around the green

It's simple: smaller strokes mean less the chance for error. By extension, smaller strokes equal smaller mistakes.

1. Putt whenever possible to do so!
2. Chip when you cannot putt!
3. Pitch or lob only when you have to!

Short sided Vs long sided

Don't give yourself the short end of the (flag)stick, literally... by being short-sided off the green. As a general rule of thumb it's best for most amateur golfers to aim for the middle of the green on their approach shot. But golf being the infinitely difficult but deceptively simple sport that it is, means the ball doesn't always go where we would like it to.

If there is a "short side" on the green (if the pin is near or in the middle, there is no short side), it means the hole is placed closer to one edge of the green. If the pin is closer to the left edge, the left side of the green and area left of the green is the 'short side'. If the hole is closer to the right edge, the right side of the green and area right of the green is the short side.

If someone says a shot is short-sided, it has missed the green to that side.

A short-sided approach shot is usually considered a negative result, because it means you don't have much room on the green before your ball will roll past the flagstick. Making it harder to land and stop your ball to leave yourself with a short putt. A short-sided approach shot often leads to the follow-up shot rolling well past the hole, and a lengthy putt or *two or three* after that.

Spoiler alert: attempting to shave off strokes by pin-seeking tight pins isn't likely to help you improve your scores...

Set The "New" Par

So you have 18 holes – more than likely the breakdown will be the following:

- 11. 4 Par 3's
- 12. 4 Par 5's
- 13. 12 Par 4's

For a total par of 72. In order to shoot a 99, you have 27 shots over par that you can utilize during the day. The simple breakdown will help you reach your goal of breaking 100.

- 9 Bogeys
- 9 Double Bogeys

This would leave you 27 over par and give you your 99.

The first step is to take your scorecard and look at the 9 most difficult holes and cross out the par and add two. For example, if one of the toughest 9 holes is a par 5, cross out the par and set the par for that hole at 7. Now do that for the 8 other most difficult holes. Take the remaining holes and cross out the par and add one. For example, if one of the other 9 holes is a par 3, set the par for that hole at 4.

Tip: If you do not know the course well, simply base it off of the handicap system, where the most difficult is rated as a 1 and the easiest is rated as the 18th hole. Or if you struggle on par 5's or par 3's do that to all of the par 5's and par 3's

This approach will free you from the barriers of the set par and allow you to feel some success throughout the day as you reach your "par" for that hole. Earl Woods, the father of Tiger Woods, used to do this for Tiger when he was a very young kid to help him feel the success and manage the course properly for his current skills level.

Set your new par! At the end of the day, you will feel better about the overall round.

With those golfers that struggled the most, I would tell them to try to bogey every hole which would leave them with a 45 or 90 for their round of golf. It is amazing how the shift in mindset can have such a positive impact on the final score.

Tip: Avoid the big number! By taking this approach, you are more encouraged and likely to punch out if you are in the trees or layup if there is water in front and you have 175 yards left. Or take something smaller than a driver off of the tee if the hole is narrow to stay out of the woods.

Awesome book by Dr. Rotella, "Golf Is Not A Game of Perfect" – (Check Current Price on Amazon).

Course Management

Now that you have your new "par" for each hole, it is time to breakdown your game plan for each hole. If you do not know the course well, be sure to do this on every tee before playing the hole. If you have played the course many times, I would recommend even writing down what your plan is, so there is less thinking on the course and more trying to follow the plan.

For example, let's say the first hole is a 360 yard par 4 and you have set your par at 5. You will design and plan for the shots that you will hit. Here we go:

- 1st Shot – the longest club that you are confident / are assured of hitting at least – 160 Yards (200 Yards remaining)
- 2nd shot - plan for 2 shots to get onto the green (I.e. lay up short of the hazards like bunkers around the green between 50-30 Yards)
- 3rd Shot – Wedge – Onto Green (Putting Next)
- 4th Shot – Putt to within 3 feet
- 5th Shot – Make the putt

We were able to reverse engineer the hole to leave you with a 30 to 50 yard "approach shot." If you get that shot on the green all you have to do is two putt. If you happen to hit it close and one putt – bonus for you! You just made a "birdie." This simple mindset approach allows you to pick shots that you can hit and enjoy the successes.

We took the driver out of your hand on the tee shot, make a simple second shot down the fairway and hit a 50-30 yard shot onto the green.

Here is another example. Second hole is a 505 yard par 5 that you have set as a par 7. You will design and play for the shots that you will hit.

Here we go:

- 1st Shot – the longest club that you are confident / are assured of hitting at least – 160 Yards (remaining distance is 345 Yards)
- 2nd Shot – hybrid/6 Iron – 150 Yards (205 Years Left)
- 3rd Shot – hybrid / 6 Iron – 150 Yards (45 Yards Left)

- 4th Shot – Wedge – Onto the Green
- 5th Shot – Buffer Shot in case you chunked one or thinned one along the way. Stick to the plan.
- 6th Shot – Putt to within 3 feet
- 7th Shot – Make the putt

I think you get the point on the strategy that you can set. You will be able to feel success and remain positive. Also, breaking it down like this allows you to feel like it is something that you can accomplish. I understand that you might hit a bad shot or two along the way, but by keeping a club in your hand that is reasonable, you won't feel the pressure to try to have a hit the ball a mile long and allow you to stay within yourself.