

Get back to basics



Everyone from Rory to a novice needs to work on their basics. Tour coach Gary Nicol will improve yours by nailing the fundamentals – and put the building blocks in place to help you play better in 2015

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To build a house that will still be standing in 100 years time, you must set down solid foundations. To cook a meal that you'll enjoy eating, you start with all the necessary ingredients. You wouldn't dream of attempting either of these tasks, or any other for that matter, without what seem like the most elementary preparations.

Sounds pretty logical and sensible, yet as golfers, we often forget or ignore the basics in favour of trying to master that "magical move". Yet if you get them correct over the winter, they'll last you a lifetime.

Just like riding a bike, once it all feels comfortable and you feel confident, they'll come automatically to you – and stay with you forever (though as I note below, always worth checking on a regular basis).

Before we set the club in motion, we need to ensure we create some good habits from the outset. Most bad shots are a direct result of a bad grip or set up, which makes it all the more strange that there is not more emphasis on, and attention paid to, ensuring the basics are absolutely spot on.

I can assure you that even the best players on Tour will frequently check every aspect of their basics. Sometimes they will have developed a tiny fault at address that impacts dramatically on the rest of their swing and the shots they hit. Get the fundamentals correct and as a direct result, you will see your golf improve very quickly.

So let's forget about any of the complicated, technical stuff that can tie your brain in knots and start over the page with the most basic and important part of golf's fundamentals – the grip. ■

"Most bad shots are a direct result of a bad grip or set up," says Gary. "Get the fundamentals correct and as a direct result, you will see your golf improve very quickly."

Basic No.1 Get your grip right

Get it wrong and it causes all sorts of issues with your swing and ball flight

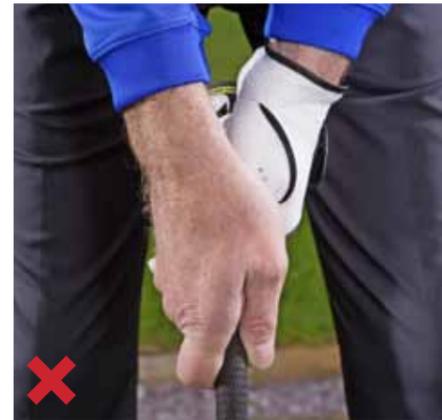
This is the alternative "GIR" – Grip it Right – and the ultimate cause and effect. Your hands are the only part of your body that come into direct contact with the golf club, so it's patently obvious they will have a significant outcome on every shot you hit.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist or even golf coach to work that out – yet I see the most amazing array of ways to 'grip' a club by amateur golfers!

Grip the club incorrectly and you've already made your first mistake... and will

spend the next two seconds (the duration of the swing) and the rest of your golfing life, making compensations for it.

Here I demonstrate the two most common faults – and how they adversely affect the subsequent shot.



A grip that's too weak

This is what you will see; two of the right-hand's knuckles on top of the grip, with most of the palm of the right hand facing the ground. The left hand would generally be too much under the shaft with the handle running through the palm of your hand, which would be facing the sky. I've seen golfers of all shapes and sizes but never have I seen one whose hands "naturally" want to be in this position. More often than not, this will have a negative effect on your alignment and posture, not to mention your swing and the clubface.

The result Grip the club like this and you'll spend an awful lot of time searching for balls a long way short and right of your intended target.

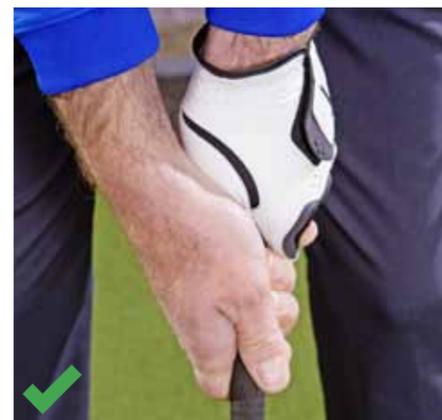


A grip that's too strong

The opposite of the above; you can see too much of the palm of the right hand and none of the knuckles. The feeling is of the right hand being too much underneath the shaft and facing the sky, rather than facing where you want the ball to go. Again, your right hand does not want to be in this position naturally.

Again, this grip makes it incredibly difficult to control the clubface at any point in your swing and especially through the impact zone... where it matters the most.

The result Grip the club like this and you can look forward to a lot of low flying duck hooks.



A grip that's just right

If you let your arms hang freely from your shoulders then place them together in front of you, the palm of your left hand will pretty much face away from your intended target and the palm of your right hand will face where you want the ball to go. This is where your hands want to be naturally and where they will want to come back to as you swing the club and hit the ball. Therefore, this is how you should grip the club.

The result This makes it a lot easier to control the direction the clubface is pointing and travelling in through impact. This may sound too simplistic but it is the one trait virtually all top players have in common, regardless of their individual techniques.

Three quick checks to get your grip correct...



1 Place the handle of your club in your gloved hand with the grip running along the base of your fingers, where they join the palm.



2 Balance the club by holding it with just the forefinger and the fleshy heel pad – if you have the correct grip, you'll be able to achieve this comfortably.



3 Put the clubhead on the ground with the handle in your right hand. Push it over to your left and "catch" it – I bet you catch it in your fingers, NOT in



your palm. This is how world No.3 Adam Scott checks constantly that his grip is right and it is a vital part of his pre-shot routine.

Grip tip 1



Get the club too much in the palm of your hand and you lose the ability to cock your wrists in the backswing (1) and un-cock them through impact (2). Get it in the base of your fingers and you can both cock your wrists effectively in the backswing (3) and un-cock them through impact (4) to achieve the holy grail of a sweet strike.

Grip tip 2



If you were throwing a ball, would you have it in your fingers or your palm for maximum control and power? Of course it's the former – so make sure you follow suit when perfecting your grip.

Grip tip 3



I always ask my students how tightly they grip the club on a scale of one to 10, 10 being a white knuckled, head-turning-purple stranglehold. If they confess to eight, that normally means about 11 in reality! Aim for around five to six out of 10. Remember – a relaxed muscle works better than a tight, contracted one. Picture Usain Bolt sprinting – there's not an ounce of tension to be seen.

Basic No.2 Nail your posture

Adopt an athletic posture so that you're body is ready to hit the ball

Posture is something amateur golfers frequently get *badly* wrong and suffer with bad backs as a result – but the good news is that it is really, really easy to get you into a really powerful position from merely reading this page!

Getting into correct posture will help with

many aspects of the swing, not least in setting you up to produce a more efficient and powerful move AND reducing the risk of injury. We want to be ready to produce a fluid action that efficiently transfers all the energy we put into the swing and through the ball. This is how to do it.

Posture tip Feet parallel or splayed?

Views on this vary depending on who you speak to. Here's my view on it: you should position your feet in the same way you walk. I walk with my feet fairly parallel, so I take my stance that way. But lots of golfers walk like Charlie Chaplin, with their feet resembling "ten to two" on a clockface. If you do that, splay your feet out slightly at address. You want to feel as comfortable and natural as possible at address.

1

Stand up straight with your feet shoulder-width apart and hold the club out in front of you with your arms gently extended.

2

Unlock your knees. I prefer to use this term rather than bending your knees which can lead to tension in your legs. By simply "unlocking" your knees you reduce the risk of creating any tension which can wreck your chances of creating a free-flowing swing.

3

Finally, bend over from the hips, not the waist, until the sole of your club sits relatively flat on the ground. As your right hand is slightly lower on the handle than your left, your right hip and shoulder should be slightly lower than your left. If the club doesn't sit flat on the ground, either your posture is still incorrect or your clubs don't suit you. If this is the case, get custom fitted!



Basic No.3 Fix the ball position

It's the simple way to improve your distance, accuracy and efficiency

You can have the best looking swing in the world, but if the ball is in the wrong position to start with, all that hard work you put in perfecting your backswing will be wasted. I would imagine most of you reading this will know that the general rule of thumb is that the longer the club, the further forward you position the ball in your stance. Ball

position is all about giving yourself the best chance of hitting the middle of the ball with the middle of the clubface; the satisfying "pure" strike. The type of shot you want to hit – high or low, fade or draw – will obviously determine where you position the ball in your stance, but we are talking about fundamentals here, so let's keep it simple. The best way to

find out the correct ball position for you is to experiment, ideally under the watchful eye of a good golf coach and preferably one who has access to Trackman. Getting this correct gives you a much better chance of striking the ball sweetly. Get it wrong and you're fighting your swing before the clubhead has even moved an inch.



Driver set-up

The ball is just inside my front (left) heel – I'd expect most of you to do something similar to that already. But look how my left shoulder is significantly higher than my right with my hands just behind the ball. My head is another inch or so back of my hands. Try to replicate this as it will encourage you to hit the ball on the up, which is the most efficient way to hit your driver. Logically, if the ball is further forward in your stance and sitting up on a tee, in order to hit the middle of the ball the clubhead needs to be traveling slightly up through the ball to create the ideal launch conditions.

Mid-iron set-up

Here the ball is slightly "target side" of the middle of my stance, which again most of you will already do. Also look how the hands are more level with the ball and there isn't quite as much tilt in my shoulders as for the driver. This is largely a result of my stance being a little narrower. As the ball is sitting on the ground, the low point in the arc of your swing needs to be an inch or two target side of the ball in order to compress it and take a nice shallow divot after the ball. This will greatly increase your chances of striking the middle of the ball with the middle of the clubface. Nirvana!

Wedge set-up

This ball position might surprise some of you. I see a lot of amateurs with the ball opposite their back foot, or even someone else's! When I talk about the short game in a future issue, I will explain in more detail why that is crazy. Play the ball an inch or two further back from the mid-iron set-up and have your hands ever so slightly further forward. Look how my shoulders are still slightly tilted. This is a set-up that encourages a descending blow but NOT a ridiculously steep angle of attack. You want to be taking "bacon rasher" divots, not "beaver pelts".



Pre-shot routine

Visualise, verbalise, execute – follow these three words before every shot

Hitting a golf shot is like making a cup of tea. It's basically a pretty straightforward process and if you repeatedly stick to that process, guess what – you get pretty good at it.

Each and every one of the world's best golfers have and always have had a pre-shot routine or process. They have one because it helps them focus on the job in hand, keeps them in the present and takes them out of the "situation". The process will not vary whether it's the first tee shot of the tournament or standing on the 18th tee on Sunday afternoon.

To those worried about the pace of play,

fear not. I am not advocating some kind of complicated and lengthy pre-shot routine that will have groups backed up behind you on the tee. Quite the opposite.

Be ready to play when it's your turn and this will not make you a slow player one little bit. In fact, it will speed play up because you will hit straighter shots and won't spend five minutes searching for your ball in the rough or the trees!

I am convinced we should all build our stance around the clubface, ensuring we have the centre of the face pointing where we want

the ball to start. What most people do habitually is get their feet, hips and shoulders aligned then the last thing they put down is the club. You probably build your putting stance in a similar fashion already, but I see very few golfers adopt the same process with their full shots. Most amateur golfers get it the wrong way round. I am a great believer in putting the clubhead down then building your stance around that. The best players in the world do it and they do it for a reason. It makes perfect sense and enables you to aim the club where you want the ball to start its journey.



1 Visualise All good shots start with visualisation. If you can't picture the shot you want to hit in your mind, how can you realistically expect to hit it? Stand behind the ball and create a clear picture in your mind of the shot you want to hit.



2 Verbalise As you step in to address the ball, tell yourself what you are going to do. For example, as you place the club behind the ball with your right hand, tell yourself "I am going to hit this down the right half of the fairway with a nice solid five-yard draw".



3 Get set Now add your left hand to the handle, ensuring the centre of the clubface is pointing where you want the ball to start.



4 Execute Finally, bring your left foot into line and take a stance that feels comfortable and relaxed. Now you are ready to execute that five-yard draw with your driver that finishes in the middle of the fairway.



Now practice! Engrain it all at the range

To hit the ground running in 2015, try to spend an hour on the range once or twice a week, working on your basic fundamentals. It will, without question, pay dividends. In addition, try to play as much golf as you possibly can and incorporate these fundamentals into your game.

To create good alignment habits, all you need to do is get some alignment aids, shafts (like I am using) or even some garden canes and build yourself an alignment box.

Practice makes permanent, so practice smart and you'll reap the benefits of longer, straighter, better struck shots and ultimately having more fun on the golf course.