

Unlocking your potential

Tiger Woods has been credited with making professional golfers more aware of just how important physical conditioning is to playing good golf. But can it make a difference to us mere mortal golfers?

The wording in the brochure caught my attention. "Let me show you how to unlock your full golfing potential."

Every golfer likes to believe they have the potential to drive the ball 250m down the middle every time. Every golfer wants to believe they are capable of playing better golf. So when I saw those words... "Let me show you how to unlock your full golfing potential,"... in black and white at my local driving range, I was hooked in.

The brochure was advertising a 12-week golf conditioning programme designed to:

- improve your posture and mobility
- increase power and distance
- reduce back pain and susceptibility to injury

What a trifecta – a programme designed to improve your golf game and your general wellbeing without you having to swing a club; for a hacker like me, it sounded ideal.

It is really only in recent years that golf has been recognised as a highly athletic, high intensity sport. In the last issue of *The Cut* we learned that English professional Lee Westwood covers 12km and burns

1300 calories per round, much the same as a Premiership footballer burns in 90 minutes. So even though the majority of time on a golf course is spent walking and waiting to hit your next shot, when you do rip into a drive you are putting major stress on your muscles.

Yet most weekend golfers don't give a second thought to preparing their bodies to play golf. Most of us rock up to our local course, extract the clubs from the boot of the car and head straight to the first tee.

A warm-up consists of perhaps a few minutes on the putting green or a quick nip of the good stuff from a hip flask.

We are happy to spend a small fortune on the latest high-tech driver or a funky looking putter without stopping to consider one obvious fact – it is your body and not the clubs that determine what distance and in what direction the golf ball travels.

In fact, there are five essentials that determine the flight and destination of the ball: 1 Clubface alignment; 2 Swing path; 3 Angle of attack/impact; 4 Clubhead speed; 5 Sweet spot.

All five essentials require you to control the club in order to achieve them. If you lack the flexibility and the strength to maintain your posture then it makes it much harder to send the golf ball where you want it to go.

Many golfers tend to compensate for poor posture and flexibility by contorting their bodies into unnatural positions, but longer term they are doing themselves damage. Poor posture is a major issue for golfers. Given our increasingly sedentary lifestyles and the hours we spend every day sitting behind a computer or stuck in traffic, most of us have a rounded upper back and a forward head position. If your posture is out of kilter, it makes it much more difficult to get your setup right and to play consistent golf.

Flexibility, or rather the lack of it, is another major issue. The more flexible you are the less likely you are to experience back, wrist, shoulder, hip or knee pain during or after your game. Increased flexibility also enables you to develop a much wider, faster swing and generate more clubhead speed.

Some golfers try a DIY approach and target their upper body at the gym but

because the mechanics of the golf swing are so complex they are often doing themselves more harm than good. That is why it pays to get expert advice. It is important to do the right stretches and target the appropriate muscles. That is where a tailor-made, golf-specific conditioning programme comes in.

“Golf is an extremely demanding sport,” says Shane Lyons of Bodyfit. “If you look at the mechanics of the golf swing, there is a huge rotational load and force being transmitted through the spine and the muscles and golfers need to be conditioned to handle the stresses.”

Lyons is a former Commonwealth Games gymnast turned personal trainer and is a qualified C.H.E.K. (Corrective High-performance Exercise Kinesiology) exercise coach who specialises in golf conditioning. His company Bodyfit runs its golf conditioning programmes out of The Golf Gym on Auckland’s North Shore.

“There is not enough emphasis placed on golf conditioning,” says Lyons. “Whether you are a golfer, a cricketer, a rugby player or a gymnast, the fundamentals are the same. Every athlete needs to be flexible, every athlete needs stability, every athlete needs strength and power.”

Before I can start piling on the power I need to have a strong foundation, so the first step is to assess my posture and my flexibility. At the start of our first session, Lyons pulls out a plumb line to measure my static posture. His furious scribbling on my assessment sheet tells me everything I need to know. The photos he emails me later confirm my fears. My head is sitting so far forward it looks like it might roll off of its own accord while my rounded back is much more Hunchback

of Notre Dame than it should be.

Lyons tells me I need to work at improving my neck rotation, the thoracic extension of the spine and my hip rotation.

“The muscles in your hip are holding you back,” he says. He hasn’t seen my swing! It turns out I also have limited shoulder rotation and Lyons warns me that if golfers don’t have full range of motion through the shoulders then “at some stage you are going to start trashing your shoulders.”

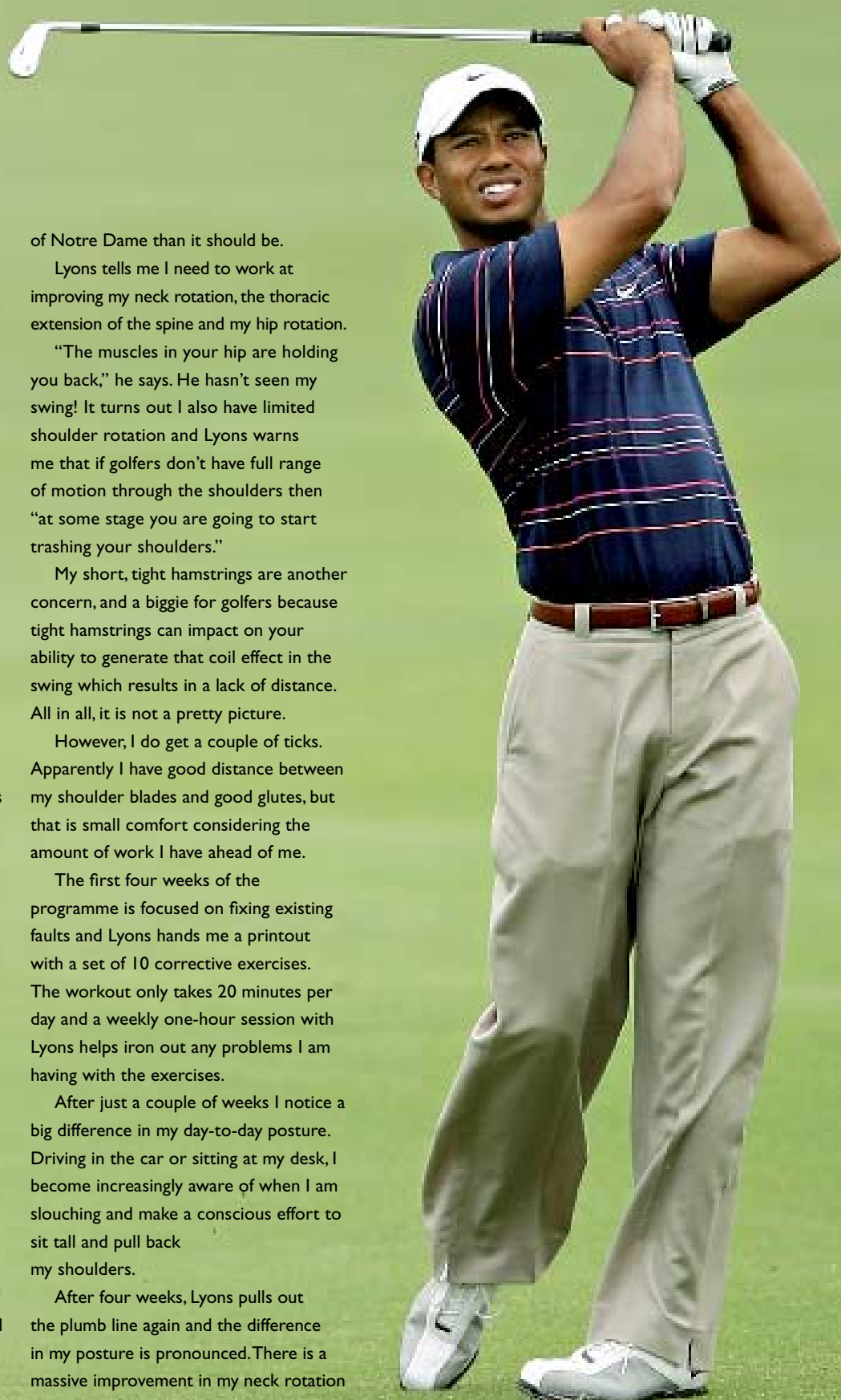
My short, tight hamstrings are another concern, and a biggie for golfers because tight hamstrings can impact on your ability to generate that coil effect in the swing which results in a lack of distance. All in all, it is not a pretty picture.

However, I do get a couple of ticks. Apparently I have good distance between my shoulder blades and good glutes, but that is small comfort considering the amount of work I have ahead of me.

The first four weeks of the programme is focused on fixing existing faults and Lyons hands me a printout with a set of 10 corrective exercises. The workout only takes 20 minutes per day and a weekly one-hour session with Lyons helps iron out any problems I am having with the exercises.

After just a couple of weeks I notice a big difference in my day-to-day posture. Driving in the car or sitting at my desk, I become increasingly aware of when I am slouching and make a conscious effort to sit tall and pull back my shoulders.

After four weeks, Lyons pulls out the plumb line again and the difference in my posture is pronounced. There is a massive improvement in my neck rotation and shoulder rotator muscles. My head



Shane Lyons puts a client through his paces.



While the Bodyfit programme delivers great results for hackers, it is also popular with players at the highest level. Paul Buchanan was working at the Takapuna Golf Club & Driving Range when he was introduced to the Bodyfit system. He was playing off a 2 handicap when he started the programme and after a couple of months he was down to scratch. He credits the golf conditioning programme with helping him to achieve this goal. "It helped me get more power and distance into my game," he said. "I'd say it added ten to fifteen metres to my game. I used to get a sore back after practising and it definitely helped me with that as well. I was able to get into positions with my swing a lot easier than I used to. I still use the stretching exercises and it helps you feel a lot freer and fully warmed up before a round. I think a conditioning programme like this will make the game a lot easier and a lot more enjoyable for players of all levels."

carriage has come back to normal levels and my spinal rotation has improved. My lower abdominal strength has gone from 50 to 80 per cent and the coordination of those muscles has also improved. Lyons tells me that activating the abdominal muscles during the golf swing protects your spine, allowing you to generate more power.

The next four-week block was the stability and strengthening phase using the Gravity training system as well as a new set of exercises. The Gravity machine isn't as scary as it sounds. It looks like a modified weights bench and uses your own body weight as resistance to target specific muscles, which for me includes my shoulders and core. Again after a few weeks I feel noticeably stronger.

The final phase embraces power where Lyons introduces me to the joys of exercises such as the woodchop, the rebounder and the horse. By this stage I had started to incorporate some swing practice into my programme and

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the results were impressive.

Lyons told me before I began the programme that on average his clients increased their striking distance by 15 to 20m. So before I started I used the state-of-the-art Doppler radar system at the The Golf Gym to gauge where my game was at.

It wasn't pretty. My ball striking was horribly inconsistent. For example, the 10 shots I hit with my 7-iron averaged 123m. Very average! My average clubhead speed was 129.2km/h. I managed a couple of decent shots closer to 130m but it was still a damning indictment of my game.

Twelve weeks on, after completing the programme and with little or no actual golf practice to speak of, I was hitting my 7-iron an average distance of 134m with an average clubhead speed of 136km/h. This time I managed to hit several shots out past the 150m mark although my stats were dragged down by a couple of clangers. Still, I was hugely impressed by the results. ●