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Minimizing Injuries and Enhancing Performance in Golf Through Training Programs

Erik P. Meira, PT, SCS, CSCS,*† and Jason Brumitt, MSPT, SCS, ATC, CSCS‡

Context: Golf is a popular sport, particularly in older populations. Regardless of age and skill level, golfers risk injury to the back, shoulder, wrist and hand, elbow, and knee. Because of the unique compressive, shear, rotational, and lateral bending forces created in the lumbar region during the golf swing, the primary sport-related malady experienced by amateurs and professionals is low back pain. Extrinsic and intrinsic injury risk factors have been reported in the literature. A growing body of evidence supports the prescription of strength training routines to enhance performance and reduce the risk of injury.

Evidence Acquisition: Relevant studies were reviewed on golf injuries, swing mechanics, training routines, and general training program design. The following electronic databases were used to identify research relevant to this report: MEDLINE (from 1950–November 2009), CINAHL (1982–November 2009), and SPORTDiscus (1830–November 2009).

Results: Injuries may be associated with lack of warm-up, poor trunk flexibility and strength, faulty swing technique, and overuse.

Conclusions: Implementing a training program that includes flexibility, strength, and power training with correction of faulty swing mechanics will help the golfer reduce the likelihood of injury and improve overall performance.

Keywords: golf; sports performance; injury prevention; swing mechanics; training program

METHODS

Selection of Articles

Table 1 presents the Medical Subject Headings used in the search strategy for this review. If we identified fewer than 250 articles by a search strategy, we reviewed the study abstracts from that category to identify potentially relevant articles. We also reviewed the reference list of each selected article to identify additional relevant publications.

References 4, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 21, 23, 34.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were as follows: First, the report’s study design must have been a randomized controlled trial, a quasi-experimental single-case design, a nonrandomized historical cohort comparison, a case series, or a case report. Second, the report had to be published in a scientific peer-reviewed journal. Last, the training program presented had to describe one of the following exercise components: warm-up, stretching (static or dynamic), flexibility training, strength training, or power training.

Exclusion Criteria

Articles that were not published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal or that failed to detail an exercise program were excluded from this study.

SWING MECHANICS OVERVIEW

The majority of injuries sustained by professional golfers relate to overuse.5 However, the majority of injuries experienced by amateur golfers are due to faulty swing mechanics,1,15,26,28 which
makes understanding the golf swing necessary when trying to reduce injuries in the amateur population. The golf swing can be divided into the setup, backswing, transition, downswing, and follow-through. Because of the large release of energy during the downswing and the deceleration of that energy during the follow-through, these phases are responsible for the majority of injuries during golf. Of course, the importance of the other phases cannot be overlooked because faulty mechanics during setup, backswing, and transition may contribute to faulty mechanics during the downswing and follow-through.

The following description of general swing mechanics is for a right-handed golfer: The left side of the body is the lead, whereas the right side of the body is back. The setup position, also known as the address, is the starting position of the golf swing. When one is in the proper setup position, the hips and knees should be slightly flexed, and the arms should hang loosely. The hips, feet, and shoulders should be aligned with the target. The feet should be situated so that the ball is generally closer to the left foot, although this somewhat depends on club length—given that the longer clubs, such as the driver, require the ball to be closer to the left foot than do shorter clubs, such as wedges. The left shoulder should be slightly higher than the right at the setup position.

The backswing begins with the takeaway. During this phase, the arms and shoulders work together as a triangular pendulum to begin taking the clubhead away from the ball. As the clubhead rises, the golfer continues to rotate the knees, hips, and spine, shifting weight toward the right foot. The top of the swing is known as the transition phase (Figure 1). At this point, the lower body begins the downswing while the upper body and club continue rotating away from the ball, which builds potential energy into the biomechanical system to be released during the downswing. By the time the upper body and club begin the downswing, the pelvis has already progressed to a 45° position. Weight is shifted from the right foot to the left foot as the downswing progresses. The potential energy stored

Table 1. Search strategy by heading and number of articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medical Subject Headings</th>
<th>Articles, n</th>
<th>Identified</th>
<th>Determined as Potentially Relevant</th>
<th>Included in Critical Appraisal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>golf</td>
<td>77 807</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golf AND sports performance</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golf AND rehabilitation</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golf AND strength</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golf AND strength training</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golf AND power</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golf AND flexibility training</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golf AND enhancement</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Transition phase of the golf swing. Hip internal rotation stretch.
during the transition phase is released from the ground up, culminating in the clubhead. This sequential release of energy is what gives the most power at the point of impact. After impact with the ball, the body decelerates segmentally into the follow-through (Figure 2). During this phase, the hips extend while the spine and shoulders rotate past the original ball position. For PGA Tour players, the average total swing time is 1.21 ± 0.14 seconds.

Analysis of muscle activity during the golf swing reveals heightened activity of the scapular stabilizers, erector spinae, abdominal obliques, and hamstrings during the backswing. The scapular stabilizers, pectoralis major, gluteus maximus, gluteus medius, vastus lateralis, biceps femoris, adductor magnus, and abdominal obliques are the most active muscles during the downswing into impact. During follow-through, the vastus lateralis, gluteus medius, abdominal obliques, adductor magnus, rotator cuff, and hamstrings all play a major role.

**DESIGNING A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR GOLF**

Many studies have examined factors that may contribute to injuries in golf. Gosheger et al found that simple modifications reduce the incidence of injuries, such as using a bag cart and performing a 10-minute warm-up before game play. Other studies have identified that increased hip flexibility can be helpful as well. Additional factors that increase the risk of sustaining a sports-related injury include decreased static trunk strength, delay in trunk muscle recruitment, and limited trunk endurance.

A growing body of evidence has demonstrated that strength training programs specifically affect performance in golf (Table 2). Fradkin et al found that a warm-up of windmills, trunk twists, static stretching, and air swings with a club for 7 weeks increased the golfers’ clubhead speed by 24% when compared with that of the control group. Thompson et al focused on engaging older golfers (i.e., in their 60s and 70s) in an 8-week progressive functional training program that included flexibility, core stability, balance, and basic resistance exercises. This group showed a significant increase in clubhead speed and Senior Fitness Test scores. Lephart et al conducted an 8-week strength training program for middle-aged golfers. Those who participated in this golf-specific exercise routine (including trunk rotations, side bending, and resisted swings) 3 to 4 times per week demonstrated significant improvements in clubhead speed, ball speed, carry distance, and total distance. Finally, the study by Doan et al found significant improvements in National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I golfers not only in clubhead speed but in putting distance control with an 11-week training program that included many classic weight-lifting exercises.

These studies provide initial evidence supporting the prescription of strength training programs for preventing injuries and enhancing performance in golfers. This population may respond well to intervention because golfers are unlikely to perform even a simple warm-up. The approach that we are suggesting follows 4 specific elements: flexibility, strength, power, and swing mechanics.

In the design of individual workouts, the order of the exercises should be considered (Table 3). Each should start with a dynamic warm-up, then power exercises, followed by routines that use multiple joints and large muscles (i.e., squats and bench press). As the athlete begins to fatigue, they should focus on transitioning from multijoint exercises to single-joint exercises, isolating the smaller muscles, such as the rotator cuff. The workout should conclude with static stretching.

**FLEXIBILITY**

For golfers, a lack of flexibility in the hip flexors and limitations of internal rotation correlate with injuries to the low back. Golfers should therefore perform daily stretching of the hip flexors and internal rotation of the hip (Figures 3 and 4). They may also find it useful to stretch for trunk rotation and basic overall shoulder flexibility as well, given that these areas are also integral to the swing. Stretching should be performed for 1 set of 30 seconds at least once a day. Because static stretching during warm-up can be detrimental to performance, we recommend dynamic stretching before an event, such as trunk twists and walking knee to chest.
Table 2. Summary of studies of golf-specific training programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Study design; level of evidence</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Program frequency and duration</th>
<th>Training program</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Grimshaw et al | Case report; 5                                                                               | Professional male golfer (age, 22 years)                                      | Core exercises performed 3 to 4 times per day; stretching exercises, 3 to 4 times per week     | Core exercises: 3 to 4 times a day, 1 set of 10 repetitions, hold 5 seconds, increasing to 20 to 30 seconds  
stretching exercises: 2 times per training session, 5-10 repetitions, 20- to 30-second holds | At the end of 3 months of rehabilitation, the professional golfer returned to play without symptoms. Kinematic changes were also noted. |
| Fletcher et al | Randomized controlled trial (experimental group: n, 6; control group: n, 5); 2                | Eleven male golfers (mean age, 29 ± 7.4 years); mean handicap, 5.5 ± 3.7      | Two times a week for 8 weeks; duration, 90 minutes                                              | Resistance exercises: 3 sets × 6-8 reps  
Plyometric exercises: 3 sets × 8 reps | Significant improvements for experimental group in clubhead speed (1.5% increase) and driving distance (4.3% increase) |
| Fradkin et al  | Matched pairs randomized into experimental (n, 10) and control (n, 10) groups; 2              | Twenty male golfers (mean age, 39.6 years; range, 23 to 64 years); mean handicap, 19.8 | Five times a week for 5 weeks                                                                  | Warm-up routine consisting of 4 exercises (15 seconds each) for increasing body temperature, 9 static stretches, and 30 seconds of golf club air swings | Experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in clubhead speed (24%) and there was a significant difference between groups over time. |
| Doan et al     | Nonrandomized concurrent cohort; 3                                                             | Collegiate golfers: 10 men (19.8 ± 1.7 years) and 6 women (18.5 ± 0.8 years); handicap not presented | Three times a week for 11 weeks; duration, 90 minutes                                            | Flexibility program, strength training routine, trunk-strengthening program.       | Significant improvements in group clubhead speed (1.62% increase) and, for men, putting distance control (15-foot [5-m] putt). All groups demonstrated significant increases in strength, power, and flexibility measures. |
### Table 2. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Lephart et al(^{23})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study design; level of evidence</td>
<td>Nonrandomized concurrent cohort; 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Fifteen male golfers (47.2 ± 11.4 years); mean handicap, 12.1 ± 6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program frequency and duration</td>
<td>Instructed to perform program 3 to 4 days a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training program</td>
<td>Stretching exercises (1 set, 1 rep, 30-second holds), strengthening exercises (3 sets, 10–15 repetitions), balancing exercises (1 set, 1 rep, 30-second holds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Significant improvement in torso, shoulder, and hip flexibility; in 3 of 12 tests; and in average club velocity, ball velocity, carry distance, and total distance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Thompson et al(^{34})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study design; level of evidence</td>
<td>Randomized controlled trial (experimental group: n, 11; control group: n, 7); 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Eighteen male recreational golfers (mean age, 70.7 ± 7.1 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program frequency and duration</td>
<td>Three times a week for 8 weeks; duration, 90 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training program</td>
<td>Periodized training program consisting of spinal stabilization exercises, balance exercises, and strength training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in clubhead speed. In addition, those in the experimental group demonstrated significant improvement in several components of the Senior Fitness Test.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Gergley(^{12})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study design; level of evidence</td>
<td>Nonrandomized counterbalanced design; 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Fifteen male golfers (mean age, 20.6 ± 1.9 years); mean handicap, 2.5 ± 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program frequency and duration</td>
<td>Two sessions, nonconsecutive days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training program</td>
<td>An active dynamic warm-up and a passive static stretching routine, plus the identical active dynamic warm-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>After the passive static stretching protocol, the golfers experienced significant decreases in clubhead speed and driving distance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Exercise order.

- Dynamic warm-up
- Power exercises
- Multiple-joint, large-muscle exercises
- Single-joint, small-muscle isolation exercises
- Static stretching

### STRENGTH

Although golf is known as a game dominated by technique, many studies have shown that strength training may be helpful in not only preventing injuries\(^{8,15,24,35}\) but also having a great effect on performance.\(^{7,9,10,23,31}\) Nearly all major muscle groups are highly active during the golf swing; thus, it is best to first build overall strength capacity before initiating functional training. A basic routine addressing all major muscle groups should provide the foundation for the program. For the legs, this includes a combination of front squats\(^{15}\) (Figure 5) and dead lifts.\(^{35}\) It also includes variations of the bench press and rows for the upper body while setting aside time for the
all-important scapular stabilizers and rotator cuff (Statue of Liberty exercise, Figure 6). A flexible bar overhead is oscillated for 30 seconds while holding the arm statically against a resistance band or tubing. Because muscular endurance capacity is a factor in golf, all exercises should be performed in the 15-repetition range, focusing on maintenance of form over any other variable.

Although core strengthening is part of the above-mentioned activities, the higher demand on the trunk during the golf swing justifies specific core stability exercises, such as planks (Figure 7) and rotations. The ability to hold the plank position for 60 seconds is ideal for the amateur golfer.

**POWER**

Regarding movement analysis, the golf swing can be described as a power movement. Total swing time is 1.21 ± 0.14 seconds for PGA Tour players. Power should be a major component of any golf training program. A delay in muscle recruitment is common in golfers with low back pain. Power exercises are quick movements for short durations against resistance. Although sport-specific trunk plyometrics have been effective for golfers, Olympic lifts may be useful. The power snatch, power clean, and push jerk not only encourage explosiveness but may enhance coordination and control throughout the
body.\textsuperscript{17} Power lifts are often added progressively as simpler free-weight exercises are mastered. The push jerk (Figure 8) is taught first, followed by the clean, because the former should be more intuitive to most athletes. For advanced or elite golfers, the power required for the snatch may be a competitive advantage.

SWING MECHANICS

Understanding swing mechanics is a fundamental component of training golfers. A short conversation with any teaching professional reveals that most success in golf comes from hitting the ball well. A golfer who hits the ball well will always outdrive a golfer who simply hits it hard. As a result of participating in a strength training program, the golfer will be able to swing the club harder while still maintaining control.

CONCLUSION

When working with golfers of all levels, from older recreational athletes to high level professionals, the sports medicine professional can provide useful insight. Through an understanding of basic swing mechanics, incidence of injuries, and human physiology, an ideal training program can be designed to enhance the game for any golfer. This training program can also be used as a rehabilitation guide for returning golfers to sport.

REFERENCES


