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PART II

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# THE TEE BOX

*Obviously, a deer on the fairway has seen you  
tee off before and knows that the safest place to  
be when you play is right down the middle.*

—JACKIE GLEASON

**Y**ou know the drill. It's a dewy summer morning just after sunrise. The air is thick with the electric whirl of peppy, just-washed golf carts; the sharp click of parking brakes eagerly being set; the rattling of clubs. There's lots of khaki, lots of coffee, an occasional ceremonial stogie, and plenty of steely-eyed practice-swing bravado. It's the first tee—and you're already choking.

Nowhere else on the face of the earth does such drop-dead gorgeous scenery elicit such gut-churning waves of “Mommy, I want to go home” fear in otherwise grown men. You gaze out to the vast green expanse before you, letting your eyes wander farther and farther afield. That's where *they* hit them, you say to yourself—the Tigers . . . the Phils . . . the Vijays . . . and, of course, the guys from sales. You let your eyes drop sadly to the neatly manicured yet clearly pathetic apron of grass between your tee box and the red ladies tees 30 yards in the distance. That's where *I* hit them, you whisper to yourself, a fist-size knot of panic growing in your gut.

Now, of course, comes the inevitable bargaining session with God: “Please . . . just let me get it airborne. Just this once. A weak pop-up to the right? Great! A dying 100-yard screamer to the edge of the fairway? Works for me! A 280-yard banana-ball that flies 100 yards into the woods and out of bounds? Ummmm, well . . . okay, sure! Who's counting, anyway? But hey, God, listen, really—anything will do: **JUST DON'T LET ME TOP THE GODDAMN THING.**” Meanwhile, two other manly foursomes have pulled up behind you, and now the gates of your personal golf hell are officially wide open: You have absolutely no idea where your tee shot is headed, and now you've got plenty of witnesses ready to attest to that fact. Hey, buddy, you're up! Have a great round.

If this sounds like your idea of fun, then God bless ya—hair shirts and cat-o'-nine-tails are available at the turn. But if you'd like to learn how to pay that \$125 greens fee without completely regretting it eighteen minutes later, take some time to browse our humble collection of first-tee tips and wisdom.



CHAPTER  
1

## TROUBLE AHEAD

### **1-1. What's the best way to prepare myself for my tee shot?**

For starters, try to give yourself some time to relax and stretch before arriving at the first tee. Running from your car to the tee with your shoes in one hand, your bag (with tees and balls flying out of the back pocket) dangling off your shoulder and a cup of scalding coffee in the other is no way to start your round. Ideally, you should get to the club early enough to get your shoes on, drop off your bag, pay for your round, grab a bite to eat and some coffee or water to drink, stretch lightly, and then head out to the range and the putting green for a few minutes.

Don't kill yourself on the range—loosen up with some easy wedge shots, and if you insist on swinging your driver, limit your shots to half or even quarter swings. There's no reason to try to hit the ball 270 yards on the driving range—nobody cares, and you're only going to

get discouraged when you start spraying your drives because you're not warm yet. Tee up a couple of balls and swing your driver back to waist high, down through impact, and then back up to waist high in the follow-through. The ball will probably only go 100 yards or so, but you'll be amazed at how straight and smoothly you can hit the ball with this kind of swing. The key word before your round should be *tempo*. Forget everything else.

Once you're up on the tee and zero hour is imminent, start your pre-shot routine, which should be a sequence of events that happens the exact same way every time you make a full swing. First, stand behind the ball and make a plan for how you're going to get the ball from point A to point B—in other words, from where you're standing to whatever happens to be your target. Now find a spot just in front of your ball—it can be a discoloration in the grass, a divot, or even a cigarette butt—and make this your intermediate target. An imaginary line that runs from your ball, through the intermediate target, and then on to your final target is called—brace yourself—the *target line*.

After you've picked this line, take a practice swing and make it a true rehearsal of the actual shot by swinging in the direction of the target, off a similar lie, and at the same speed you'll use for the swing you're about to make. If you're hitting a driver from the tee, make sure you don't take a divot with your practice swing; if you're hitting an iron, make sure the club takes a little grass.

Once you've pictured the shot in your mind and have made a practice swing, take a deep breath to relax and then walk around to the side of the ball. Step into your address position with your back foot leading the way. Before you bring your front foot into position, sole the clubface behind the ball, so that it points at the target. Then, while keeping the clubhead in this exact position, bring your front foot into position so that your body is perpendicular to the leading edge of the clubface. You've now locked in your direction.

From this position, take one look at the target by rotating your head without lifting it, waggle the club, and then swing, allowing the

speed of your swing to produce the correct distance. Each player will have nuances to his or her routine—for example, you may want to look at the target twice before you swing. But the important point is to be consistent. If you normally look at the target twice, but find yourself looking down the fairway a third or fourth time while playing a particular shot (usually under extra pressure), your routine has been broken and this is a clear indication that you're uncertain about some element of the shot. Treat this as a signal to step away and gather more information (perhaps switch clubs), then step up to the ball with a reaffirmed commitment to your plan and make your best swing.

If your pre-shot routine still doesn't completely settle you down, a couple of other thoughts might come in handy. For starters, try pretending that you're simply hitting into a huge curtain or net stretched across the tee just a few feet in front of you (as you would at a golf store or an indoor range). Many golfers hit the ball better into a net because they don't have to worry about being embarrassed by bad ball flight.

Now's the time to use the relaxed tempo that the half-swing drill on the driving range taught you. You don't want to take a half swing here, but a great thought to have as you take the club back is the 80 percent rule. If you can concentrate on swinging at only 80 percent of your maximum power on the tee, your accuracy—and often your distance—will improve dramatically.

A final swing thought concerns your breathing. If you've ever lifted weights, you know that you're supposed to inhale as you let the weight down and exhale as you *push* it back up. The best time to take your driver back is right after you've exhaled and your muscles are no longer straining to keep the air in your lungs. So once you've set up to the ball, breathe normally, and when you're ready to go, take in one big breath, release it, and as you finish releasing it, start the club back. You'll definitely notice the difference in your muscles if you make an effort to time your breathing this way, and you can even make this a regular part of your pre-shot routine.

## 1-2. Which club should I hit off the tee?

Although most people don't think of it this way, the tee box is the one place on the golf course where you're allowed to artificially elevate the ball, so the idea is to hit the least-lofted (and therefore the longest) club possible from this "gimme" lie. On most par-4s and par-5s (we'll discuss par-3s separately in chapter 3), this means that you're going to hit your driver. Although most drivers feature anywhere from 8 to 13 degrees of *loft* (which is really not that much when you consider that a putter usually has about 4 degrees of loft), the upward path that the teed ball allows the clubhead to take into impact will give you all the height you need on your shot, and the long driver shaft will allow you to generate more swing speed—and, therefore, more distance—than any other club in your bag.

This doesn't mean, however, that the driver is always the right club off the tee. A hole that features sand or water protecting the spot where you expect your ball to land, or that doglegs sharply to the left or right at that same point, or that features an especially narrow fairway, is begging you to swallow your pride and take out a safe club such as a fairway wood, a hybrid, or a long iron on the tee. Leaving yourself a slightly longer second shot from a comfortable lie in the fairway is always a better option than facing a shorter approach shot from junk—or, of course, than having to take a penalty shot and then trying to get up and down from 160 yards.

## 1-3. How should I grip the club in the tee box?

Not surprisingly, many golfers take one look at what seems like an ocean of grass spread out in front of them and decide right then and there that no flimsy little clubshaft is going to stand between them and a 300-yard drive. That may be a noble sentiment, but it's also a pretty deadly one



To take the proper grip, start by balancing the club on your right shoulder with only your left hand on the club. Make sure your left thumb is under the shaft.



Place your right hand on the shaft so that your palms face each other, and use the heel and thumb pads of your right hand to form a pocket for the left thumb.



**If you can extend your right index finger down the shaft so that the shaft is directly between that finger and the target, your right hand is correctly positioned.**

for your game. The formula is very simple—the more you strangle the club, the shorter you're going to hit the ball. Too much tension in your hands prevents your wrists from cocking correctly, and power-wise you can't recover from a bad wrist cock. Plus, any tension in your hands immediately radiates up your arms and into your shoulders and chest. This severely restricts your ability to properly coil your body in the backswing, and then, in the downswing, to unwind whatever torque you may have managed to store in your upper body.

You may have heard the old canard that you should grip the club as though you were holding a baby bird. Maybe, but more specifically, you should grip the club so that the handle only touches various spots on your fingers and palms—it shouldn't be smothered by all of the flesh on your hands. Let the club float in your hands, with just enough contact to keep it from flying out of your grasp during the swing.

Many golfers have trouble taking the proper grip when the club is

soled on the ground, so here's a better way. Start by balancing the club on your right shoulder (for right-handers), with the toe of the club hanging straight down. Place your left thumb on the handle so that it's directly under the shaft. The club should now rest between the two diagonal palm creases in your left hand so that when you close your hand, the handle is anchored under the heel pad, which gives you control of the club without having to squeeze it to death.

Your right hand now comes in from the side, so that your palms face each other. The handle should be held in the fingers of your right hand, with the heel and thumb pads of the right hand forming a pocket to accommodate the left thumb. When your right hand is closed on the club, your thumb and index finger should form a trigger, and your right thumb should be to the left of the shaft.

Once both hands are on the club, you can check to see if your right hand is placed correctly by simply extending your right index finger down the shaft. If it extends exactly down the side of the shaft so that the shaft is directly between your index finger and the target, it's in good position. If it's on either the top or the bottom of the shaft, you need to make an adjustment.

## **1-4. How do I know if I'm standing properly on the tee?**

Whatever else golf is, it's definitely a game of geometry—it's lines and angles on a three-dimensional playing field that connect the golfer, the ball, and the target. And the place to begin with correct geometry is the setup, because the address position writes the script for the entire swing.

When you're preparing to set up to the ball, remember this golf variation of the old KISS acronym: Keep It Simple . . . and Square. After you've lined up your shot from behind the target (as outlined in section 1-1), take your address position with your driver so that your

heels are shoulder-width apart, your hands are directly below your chin, and the ball is teed up opposite your left heel. When you've done this, picture an imaginary box on the ground that has one corner at the ball, another corner at your left heel, a third corner at your right heel, and a fourth corner at a point behind the ball on the target line that's even with your right heel. (When you're on the range, you can actually construct this box with four golf clubs to help you visualize it better.)

Now square everything else up to the box. Keep your feet pointed straight ahead, perpendicular to the target line. Align your *shoulder line* to the target line. Then take a relaxed, *neutral* grip and *square* the clubface to the ball. You now have a simple, repeatable setup that you can be proud to display on any tee box—even the one directly in front of the clubhouse.

Of course, not everyone is going to have the exact same posture at address. All golfers don't have the same posture when they walk, so why should they all stand the same way when they're hitting a golf ball? When you're building your stance, you should take the time to customize it to your physique. If your chest is large or you're not very flexible, for example, drop your back foot into a closed position with more flare and bend more from the hips. If you're very thin chested, try standing more upright with less flare; if you're tall, flex your knees a bit more.

Once you've customized your stance and you're set up square to the ball and your target, it's time to make a swing. Take the clubhead straight back along the target line as you turn your upper body around your right leg and allow the folding of your right elbow to elevate the club up to the top—don't lift the club with your arms. At the top, start your downswing by shifting your weight into your front hip and then turning your hips back toward the target. Simply bring the clubhead back down to the upper left-hand corner of your box, watch the clubface meet the back of the ball, and let the force of your rotation carry

your club into a full, unrestricted follow-through. It's a simple setup and a simple swing, and you'll be amazed at how many fairways you hit if you make a point of watching the clubface meet the ball.

### FIVE-FACES SHOT ANALYSIS

Clubface Position: Square

Ball Position: Left heel

Shoulders: Square

## 1-5. How do I know if I'm aiming properly on the tee?

One factor that many golfers don't take into account when they're aiming their ball on the tee (or anywhere else on the golf course) is the concept of *parallax*. In a nutshell, parallax is the apparent shift of an object against a background caused by a change in the position of the observer. Why should you care? Because the imaginary line that you see between your ball and the target when you're standing *behind* the ball seems to move to the right when you approach the ball from the left to address it. In fact, nothing has changed but the position of your eyes. But if you're not aware that this illusion is taking place, you'll aim to the right, where your brain has tricked you into thinking your target is. Tests show that parallax is the reason why 95 percent of all golfers aim to the right of the target, so make sure that you're in the 5 percent who don't.

The problems that parallax can cause are exactly why it's so important to pick an intermediate target—usually a divot or a discoloration in the grass a few feet ahead of your ball—while you're standing behind the ball looking down the target line. It will give you a reference point and a line that won't change when you address the ball. At that point, all you need to do is to line up your clubface and shoulder line with this line just in front of your ball and let 'er rip.

Remember: keep your intermediate aiming points as close to you as possible, because it's easier to aim at something that's 12 inches in front of you than at something that is 40 yards away.

## 1-6. Where in the tee box should I tee the ball?

If your idea of a good drive is to simply advance the ball—anywhere, and for any distance—you really don't need to worry about where you're putting your tee in the ground. Worry, instead, about your feet—find a level piece of ground that you can stand on comfortably and tee your ball, if possible, behind a good-size divot, which can be very useful as an aiming point (see sections 1-1 and 1-5). If you're at a skill level that allows you to at least understand how most of your drives fly, or if you can actually work the ball and make it do what you want it to do, then you can start thinking about tee-box position.

Here are a couple of basics: if you tend to hit a *fade*, tee your ball on the right side of the tee box and aim down the left side so that your normal fade will put the ball in the center of the fairway. If the ball doesn't fade the way you planned, it'll still land on the left side of the fairway, and if you overcook that trusty left-to-right shot, you'll be hitting your second shot from the right side of the fairway. If you tend to naturally *draw* the ball—that is, if your normal ball flight is right to left—reverse these instructions.

## 1-7. How high should I tee the ball?

It depends on which club you're hitting. If you're using an iron or a hybrid from the tee box, the tee is basically there for insurance—you're using it simply to give yourself the best possible lie and to keep yourself from hitting a *flier*, causing it to fly farther than anticipated. For this reason, the tee should be pushed almost all the way into the ground, so

that the head of the tee is the only thing visible. This will ensure that your clubface makes contact with the ball first and then the turf.

The opposite is true with a driver. Because the head of the driver is bigger (higher from top to bottom and longer from back to front), it must be teed higher so that the top edge of the driver is below the center of the ball. This is especially important with today's big-headed drivers, which have a *hot spot* that is located above the traditional sweet spot on older clubs. You'll never hit the ball on the hot spot if the ball is teed too low.

A common misconception is that teeing a ball high will result in pop-ups with your driver or your fairway wood, but the only way this can happen is if you're hitting down on the ball too steeply, rather than sweeping the club up through impact. If you hit down on a high-teed ball, the clubface will literally dive under the ball, and you'll make contact with the top edge of the face and pop the ball up. But if you remember to sweep your woods up into the ball, pop-ups will become a thing of the past. (See also section 2-5.)



**When hitting your driver, tee the ball so that the top edge of the clubface is below the center of the ball.**



When hitting an iron off the tee, tee the ball just high enough for the thin part of another tee to fit between the ball and the ground.

## 1-8. How do I adjust my tee shot for the wind?

It depends on the tee and the direction of the wind. If you're on the tee of a par-4 or a par-5 and you're hitting directly into a headwind, you need to keep the ball low to prevent it from ballooning up into the wind. If you're talented enough, you may want to turn the ball over a bit (impart draw spin to the ball) for maximum roll when the ball hits the ground. To do this, tee the ball lower than usual and just inside your left heel, then strengthen your grip (turn both hands to the right on the handle of the club). Address the ball and then move your left toe forward an inch or two to close your stance. Take the club back on a shallow swing plane, but make sure you take it back and then down again along your shoulder line (which is pointing right of the target), not your target line. This will create an *inside-to-out* swing

path, which, together with your *strong* grip, will impart right-to-left draw spin on the ball. Make sure to turn your right arm over your left through impact and finish the swing by taking the club low and around your lower back.

If you've got the wind at your back, "tee it high and let it fly" definitely applies—you want to get the ball as high as possible into a tailwind for the maximum amount of carry down the fairway. Tee the ball up as high as possible off your left heel, or even slightly farther forward than that, toward your left toe. Maintain a neutral to slightly strong grip and finish with your hands and the clubhead high over your left shoulder. Your ball should rise high into the carrying tailwind, and the draw spin that your closed stance and the release of your forearms impart to the ball will give it those extra few yards of roll when it lands.

Playing into a left or a right crosswind depends on your skill level and the kind of tee shot you're most comfortable with. If you've got



**If you need to hit a tee shot with your driver into a headwind, move the ball back a few inches and tee it so that the top of the ball is even with the top of the clubface.**

a left-to-right wind and you're comfortable hitting a fade, tee the ball up on the right side of the tee box, aim toward the left side of the fairway, open your stance slightly, and then swing down your shoulder line, rather than your target line. Your ball will start left, but the left-to-right crosswind and the cut spin that your open stance is imparting to the ball will then take it back to the center or, at worst, to the right side of the fairway.

If you prefer to hit a draw into that same left-to-right wind, however, tee the ball up on the right side of the tee box, aim down the center of the fairway, close your stance slightly, swing down your shoulder line, rotate your forearms through impact, and finish the swing with low hands at shoulder level. The draw spin you put on the ball will fight the left-to-right wind, and you should end up in the center of the fairway or down the left side.

If you've got a right-to-left crosswind, simply reverse the previous instructions in order to play whichever shot—draw or fade—is more comfortable for you.

If you're teeing off on a par-3, first determine how much more or less club you should take to compensate for any tee or green elevation (see sections 3-3 and 3-4). With that information in hand, you can then make your wind calculations. An unscientific but generally safe rule of thumb is that you shouldn't change your club when the wind is below 5 mph, but you should take one more or one less club for every 10 mph above that. So, for example, if you normally choose a 7-iron on a level 150-yard par-3, you should take a 5-iron when hitting into a 20-mph wind on the same hole, but an 8-iron if you have a 10-mph wind at your back.

On the other hand, if you're playing a 150-yard hole from an elevated tee into a 10-mph wind, you first determine how much less club you should take to adjust for the drop in elevation (let's say, for the sake of argument, that you decide you need one less club), then apply your wind calculation to that club selection. So if you normally

take a 7-iron on a level 150-yard hole, you would now take one less club (an 8-iron) to compensate for the elevation change, and then take one more club (back to a 7-iron) to compensate for the 10-mph wind in your face.

## **1-9. How do I keep from getting fleeced on the first tee?**

One reason that golf is such a popular game is that it lends itself to betting, and for millions of golfers the game wouldn't be the same without a little something on the line. Even the United States Golf Association (USGA) loosens its collar a bit in the rulebook, saying that there is "no objection to participation in wagering among individual golfers or teams of golfers when it is incidental to the game, the players in general know each other, participation in the wagering is optional and limited to the players, the sole source of all money won by players is advanced by the players, and the amount of money involved is not considered excessive." Of course, you may have a different definition for the word "excessive" than your Porsche-driving playing partners, but there are ways to cut your losses ahead of time.

The fact is that the higher a player's handicap, the less likely he or she is to shoot a score reflective of it. Low handicappers usually score a lot closer to their handicap (primarily because they actually have a real handicap) while high handicappers can very easily shoot scores much higher than their handicap—especially under the pressure of playing against a low handicapper. So be careful if you're a 25 and just off your best round (which you happened to record at sunset, with your dog sitting in the cart as your witness), because the odds are that you may not shoot anywhere near your handicap when you're up against the club champ on a busy Saturday morning with cash on the line.

The first-tee negotiation process is part of the fun, but if you're not on your toes, you can lose the match right there. Think of it this way:

If you're going to bet, the negotiating process is crucial to your chances out on the course—it's the only thing you can do to improve your odds of winning that has nothing to do with your talent as a player, so you might as well get good at it.

There are two types of first-tee negotiations: the kind with people you know, and the kind with people you don't know. It's easier to make the process work in your favor with golfers you know—just use the 10 percent rule: If you're the low handicapper, give your opponent 10 percent less than he or she asked for; if you're the high handicapper, ask for 10 percent above your handicap.

If you're negotiating with people you don't know, keep the bet small. If someone starts egging you toward a bet that's bigger than an amount you're comfortable losing, don't hesitate to bow out gracefully—it's your money, not his. Strangers who want to play for significant stakes are usually pretty sure they're going to win, even if they have to cheat.

Perhaps the most important point is to make sure that everyone understands the rules for the day's wager. Every gambling game is different, and some can get confusing, so make sure you know the nuances of the game before you leave the first tee.