



EXCLUSIVE BY
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STRATEGIC THINKING

AT the risk of sounding pessimistic, golf is essentially a game of minimising errors. Each shot played requires a plan taking into account a variety of considerations. You should know exactly what you want to achieve with any shot and visually rehearse and get a physical feel for that plan before attempting the shot. This will give you a great chance of success.

Golf is also a complex motor skill sport where fine control seems fleeting. It is for this reason that part of the planning for any shot needs to have an answer to the question: if I hit a poor shot, how can I still be in play?

This article will give you a guide to the types of things you need to consider when playing different types of shots. Good strategic thinking skills require practice, knowing your game, and the course, as well as common sense. It is too easy for emotion to cloud thinking and for planning to go from calculated risks to recklessness. The one time in 20 that a reckless plan succeeds doesn't justify its place in your game.

Consider the best rounds you have played and it is likely they were played with a solid plan for each shot and plenty of confidence to back that plan. Having a plan is one way to support your base of confidence ... having no plan will undermine confidence as soon as a poor shot is played.

Let's look at a variety of common shot types – or situations on the course – that you will encounter and the things that should be part of your planning for those shots. This will not be an exhaustive list, but will provide a framework to you to further develop your strategic thinking.

TEE SHOTS

Aside from par-3s, the main strategic questions to ask yourself – perhaps with the assistance of a course guide (pic 1) or your own yardage notes – on the tee are:

Where is the best place to play my shot to the green?

Depending on fairway direction, green shape or pin position, hitting to one side of the fairway may be better than another. Generally, hitting from a flat area will be easier than hitting from a sloping lie.

Where are the hazards and rough?

Hitting from the rough can sometimes be as penal as hitting from a fairway bunker as ball control is reduced due to loss of spin. Choosing to hit a 3-iron instead of a driver to avoid a hazard is often a more

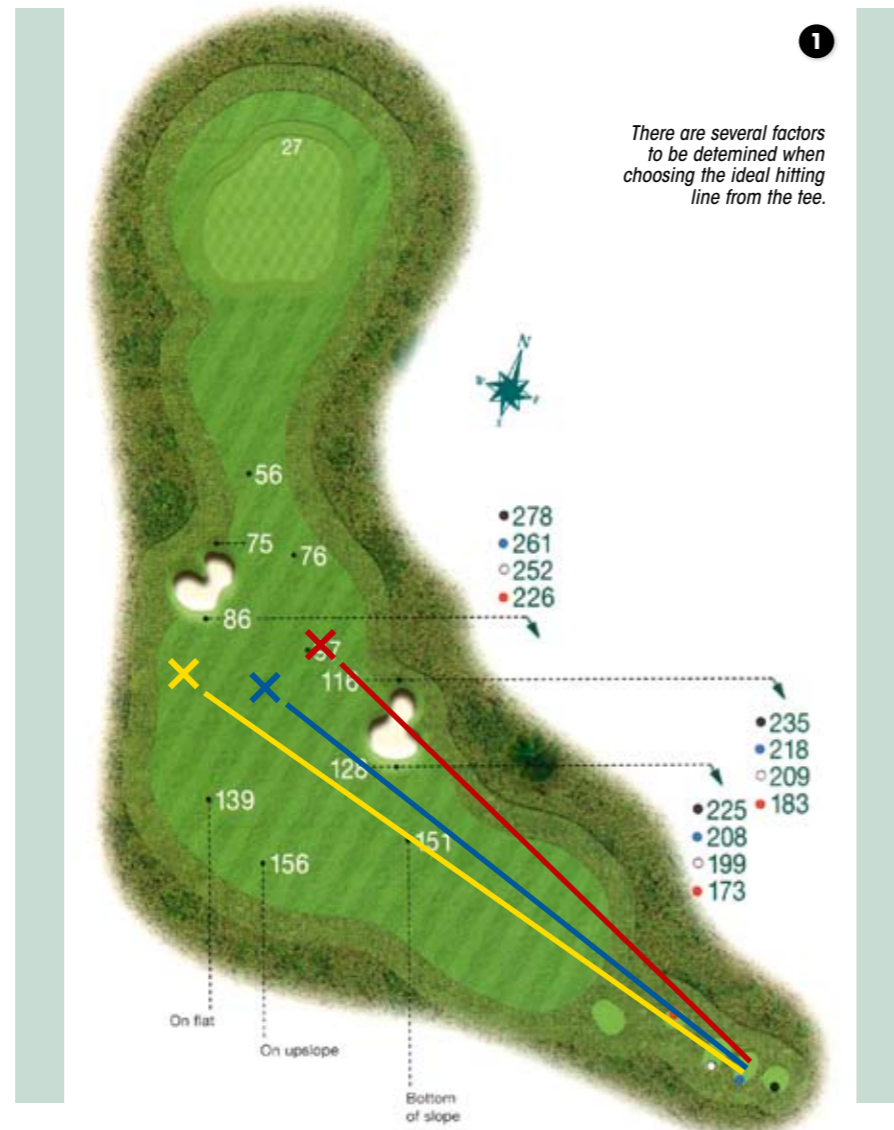
sound long-term strategy as it reduces the risk of dropping multiple shots on one hole.

Where is my biggest landing area?

The width of fairways is deliberately narrowed as you get further from the tee. This is to reduce the longer hitter's advantage if they have to risk playing from the rough against a shorter tee shot than being played from the fairway.

Which direction is the wind coming from?

This will have a major influence on club selection and shot trajectory. Most players finish short of their target on normal shots,



this is even more so when hitting into the wind.

What is the best way to get the ball to that point?

Answers to these questions might have you needing a club other than a driver to finish in the optimal position. Selecting the correct club to get to that position means you should be fairly sure about how far you hit each club – especially true if you need to either hit over, or finish, short of a bunker or other hazard.

TO THE GREEN

Approaching the green, it is critical to know how far you hit the ball with each club. Professionals' shot errors are more directional than distance related. Much of this is also due to the high level of consistency that those players have with the quality of their ball-striking. However, the most common error for the rest of us is finishing short of the target.

This is usually because of overestimating how far we hit the ball or mis-hitting the shot. When determining the club to use for a given distance, allow for your average shot distance rather than your maximum distance.

Where is the safest target area?

Playing to the middle of the green makes

great sense for most shots as it provides the greatest margin for error. If the ball does finish in the middle of the green, then you probably won't have a long putt.

When you are practising at a driving range, you will notice that your shots will finish in a spread pattern around the target; the longer the club and the higher a player's handicap, generally, the greater the spread. If this spread is representative of what you would normally produce on the golf course, then it makes no sense to attempt to hit shots to tight pins and expect a good result.

Straight or shaped shot?

The answer to this comes back to knowing your tendency. Where possible, always play to your tendency or 'stock shot'.

AROUND THE GREEN

There are a number of strategy 'rules' for shots around the green. The first, and most obvious, is to get the ball on the green in one shot. This is relevant when you are faced with a difficult bunker or pitch shot (pic 2). Play the shot that you feel you will be successful with at least 80 percent of the time.

A second rule is that it is safer and easier to judge the distance of a shot which is running than flying. This means opting to

chip and run as opposed to hitting a lob shot. Naturally, this doesn't apply if you need to pitch over a bunker or have rough between you and the edge of the green.

FROM THE ROUGH

Any shot played from the rough will have a lower spin rate than the same shot played from the fairway. What this means is that shots to the green will run further than if they were hit from the fairway. If you are attempting to shape a shot from the rough, it will tend to fly straighter.

IN THE WIND

How can I stop the wind affecting my shots so much?

When playing in crosswinds and hitting into the wind, lowering your ball flight will give you more control. The tendency, especially when hitting into the wind is to hit the ball harder, which will actually increase the spin rate, creating a higher ball flight. Taking a club with a straighter face and hitting it easier will keep the ball flight lower; better for both cross winds and head winds.

Hitting downwind can be tricky as the ball will tend to run more as it hits the ground as it is being blown forward by the wind. Allow for this by landing the ball shorter than you would in still conditions. ▶



PHOTOS: BRENDAN JAMES X 3; MOONAH LINKS (COURSE GUIDE)

3

PUTTING

Should I be aggressive or lag?

Distance control is the key for all putts. The optimal speed for any putt is for the ball to finish around 40 centimetres past the hole, if it misses. Following this rule you will be neither aggressive nor defensive, but putting at a pace that gives you the greatest chance of success.

And, of course, the best way to get a feel for the distance is to look at the hole from behind your ball (pic 3) and make some practice strokes.

Why do most putts miss on the low side?

Getting the line right on any breaking putt is a combination of both line and pace. The faster the green, the more break must be allowed on any putt. On breaking putts, most players tend to under-allow by 50 percent or more! This is the reason why the vast majority of putts miss the hole on the low side. Aiming higher (pic 4) will actually have the ball moving toward the hole at the end of its roll, rather than moving away.

Playing the game well involves thinking clearly and weighing up the risk-and-reward of each shot you play. Executing a well-thought-out plan will make you a winner whatever your current standard. ●



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BRING ON THE GAME



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