

“Only Way of Playing at the Golfe”

One of the oldest known treatises on how to play golf was turned up in the National Library at Edinburgh, Scotland, a decade ago by Dr. H. W. Meikle, the librarian. The treatise appeared in a diary kept by an unknown medical student at Edinburgh in 1687 and was summarized in the August 2, 1938, issue of THE SCOTSMAN by Dr. Meikle and reviewed again in the August 18, 1938, issue of the London TIMES.

David R. Tod of Spokane, Wash., whose own golfing career dates back to the gutty ball, has prepared a series of excerpts from this treatise, which is fascinating in its indication that there is really little new under the sun where golf style is concerned. In fact:

Bless Their Innocence

“All those who have ever written textbooks about golf must be, or at any rate ought to be, feeling rather humble at this moment. They think that they found out all about pivoting and pronating and rotating. Lord bless their innocence! It was all discovered 263 years ago and said much more briefly than they have ever said it.

“A kind friend has sent me a cutting from THE SCOTSMAN of August 2, 1938, and I have been reading in it an enthralling article by Dr. H. W. Meikle, librarian of the National Library. In his library he has discovered a diary kept by a medical student of Edinburgh in 1687. Entirely for his own amusement he wrote down what he boldly called ‘The Only Way of Playing at the Golfe.’

“He held that the knees ought to be a little bent, that there should be plenty of weight on the right foot, that the ball should be a ‘little towards the left foot.’ He had experimented with what is today called the ‘shut stance’ and was clearly of the opinion that it must not be exaggerated, for he said that at most ‘your left foot must stand but a little before the right.’

He knew all about pivoting (though he did not call it that), for he said that ‘all

the strength of the stroake is from the swing of the body in turning about’ and, further, that you must turn yourself ‘as it were upon a center, without moving your body out of the place of it.’

“The writer likewise knew all about the doctrine of ‘keeping bent,’ as an American Champion has described it, for having told you to incline the body a little from the small of the back, he adds you must ‘keep your body in this posture all the time.’

“Finally (I have left out a good deal), he held decided views on the controversy—a very tiresome one it has become—whether the swing is begun by the hands or by a movement of the hips or legs or feet. He was, as I judge, of the body school, for he said that, ‘Your armes must move but verie little, all the motion must be performed with the turning of your body about.’

“There is only one fine, crusted old doctrine of which I can find no mention. This ingenious young man said nothing about keeping your eye on the ball. Perhaps he thought that if you followed correctly all his other rules, the eye would stay on the ball of its own accord, and who shall say that he was wrong? It is not mere anxiety that makes our heads fly upwards but some antecedent and criminal movement into the bargain.

“That antecedent movement he traced unerringly to its most common source. It comes from the players ‘stricking’ too hard. ‘Incressing their strength in the stroak makes them alter their ordinaire position of their body’ and then they ‘readily miss the ball.’ In order to avoid this state of things you must ‘play with little strength at first but yet acuratly observing all the rules of poustour,’ for, as he justly observes, a ball hit ‘exactly will ‘fly verie farr.’ Moreover, to learn to hit ‘well within yourself,’ as we might call it nowadays, will be very useful when you come to the ‘halfe chops and quarter chops.’ No full shots with No. 6 or No. 7 for him! He preferred the old, elegant and almost lost art of the half shot.”