

COURSE STRATEGY IN TOURNAMENT GOLF

By

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Ever been asked to conduct a golf clinic? If so, and unless you are an experienced teaching pro with a grooved swing of your own, you have approached the task with something less than confidence.

Several such invitations have come my way and I always tried to oblige. The difficulty was that professional type clinics necessarily involve technical exhibitions of shot-making. This requires a competent and consistent striker of the ball, someone who can demonstrate "finesse" as well as orthodox shots. The purpose, of course, is that the audience may learn something and find the clinic of value.

All this was in my mind when I considered an invitation to give a clinic at a USGA Junior Championship. It would be of my design, to emphasize the mental side of championship golf rather than shot-making technique. In particular, I wanted to highlight such competitive fundamentals as tactics and strategy. The plan was approved as an experimental departure.

After all, the audience would be composed of youngsters who had already shown their scoring ability to the extent of surviving qualifying rounds around the country. Most of the boys had played considerable competitive golf, both within the mushrooming junior program and against their elders. More was to be gained by such players in having their thought processes stimulated than in trying to show them shot technique that they already knew. It has been by experience, during more than twenty years of national competition, that while young golfers often excel mechanically, they are generally handicapped by their lack of experience with the vital part of the game that is "played between the ears."

Thus armed with self-styled wisdom if not ability, and unencumbered with golfing equipment, I arrived at the scene of the USGA Junior Championship several hours before the clinic. There was time



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to walk around the course and make notes on the layout of the holes as they might affect the golfer's plan of attack in certain competitive situations. This brief tour of the course enabled me later to offer a first-impression analysis that called for individual consideration as the boys would play the course each day. The players had been on the scene for a couple of days of practice rounds so all I could hope to do was to bring out points that may not have occurred to them and thus encourage them to use their heads a little better. I had the advantage of a large blackboard and chalk, the better to make my points by diagrams.

The art that I preached that day by practical example, hole-by-hole, has aptly been called "course management." It is a crucial phase of the game and even more important on better courses that

provide a truer test of championship golf. A really fine layout can and does create a situation where the golfer is competing against the course as much as against his opponent, or even himself. This essentially mental process of course management can be further complicated by the variable conditions of weather—wind, rain, and cold, or worse—that can plague a match, or even an entire tournament if geography and season conspire unfavorably. The tougher the course and the subtler its challenge, the greater is the golfer's need to think his way around.

Other things being equal the winning player is usually the one who also manages his time, behavior, and total attitude when not on the course, in such a way as to bring him to the first tee with a competitive advantage over his incompletely prepared opponent. This subject has many facets, ranging from clothing design to body chemistry and psychology. The net effect of this point that I tried to impress upon the junior golfer was that, as with anything else worthwhile in life,

the golfer should try to present, for any given competition, his very best self. Seemingly little, unrelated things can add up to a big difference, more than compensating for a superficial difference in basic scoring ability.

The last, best chance that we veterans have in modern competition is to rely heavily on headwork and to hope that the bold younger opponent tries to muddle through on the strength of his muscles alone. But it wouldn't be wise to tell the readers all of the little competitive secrets that I mentioned to the Juniors that day, for I may draw one of you in a match someday. Besides, you might think I had gone too far in counselling the Juniors, thus short-circuiting the normal process of their competitive maturity.

As a matter of fact—now that I think of it—one of the Juniors at that experimental clinic of two years ago was Jack Nicklaus who now holds the Trans, North and South, and National Amateur titles and wears a Walker Cup jacket—and he is still only 19.

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