

USBGA Blind Golf Manual



“You don’t have to see it ... to tee it”

BLIND GOLF

LEARNING AND PLAYING THE GAME

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1. CONCEPT COACH AND PLAYER RESPONSIBILITIES

Contrary to what one would initially perceive, blind golf is a team sport. The team consists of the blind golfer (player) and the coach. Simply stated, if there were no coaches in blind golf, there would be no blind golfers.

The responsibilities of the coach include walking the player to the ball, describing the shot and the distance, helping with club selection, and positioning and aligning the player and the club to the ball. The coach then stands back while the player makes the swing. Then the coach describes the ball flight and results.

The player's responsibilities include being able to swing the club in such a way as to produce the necessary shot described by the coach. This is possible for the blind golfer because, simply stated, a correct golf swing is not aimed at the golf ball, but rather, a ball "gets in the way" of a properly made swing. This involves three main principles. First, the player must have learned the basic mechanics of the golf swing and be able to reproduce the swing while maintaining balance. Second, the player must achieve a proper set-up (this is done with the help of the coach). Finally, the player must be able to execute the shot so that the desired distance is attained.

2. LEARNING BLIND GOLF TEACHING TECHNIQUES AND METHODS

An examination of the various aspects of blind golf begins with the learning stage. Most blind golfers throughout the world have been blinded as a result of some type of accident or disease that causes sight loss. Some played golf prior to their blindness, in which case, the learning of the golf swing was no different than that for a sighted person. Others took up golf after being blinded, and the learning process for these golfers differs greatly from that of the sighted golfer. Of great importance, though, is the fact that most blind golfers have had the "luxury" of, at some time in their life, actually seeing a proper or well-executed golf swing. The difference in the difficulty of learning the golf swing, having experienced seeing a proper swing as opposed to not

having seen one, is not known, but it is likely that having seen a well-executed golf swing would decrease the learning difficulty for blind golfers.

Regardless, when a blind golfer sets out to learn the golf swing, the instructor must use different teaching techniques than he would with a sighted golfer. The reason for this is that a golfer learning without visual input or information has less awareness or perception of the degree of movement of various body parts. For example, if an instructor tells the player to move the club "straight" back at the start of the golf swing, the blind golfer must rely solely on what "feels" straight, because he cannot actually see the path which is straight back from the ball. In another example, if the instructor tells the golfer that, in the top of the backswing, the hips should have rotated 45 degrees, the golfer without vision has a greater difficulty in achieving this position. He relies on occasional but continual correction from the instructor in terms of "feel". After a swing, the instructor may say, "use more hip turn", or "you took the club away inside the target line", and the golfer will make an adjustment on the next trial, based totally on feel.

Along with instructor feedback which tells the blind golfer what he should "try to feel" in the golf swing and the correct position of his body at key positions in the swing, the blind golfer also depends greatly on the trial-and-error method. A beginner blind golfer will likely make many shots which are characterized by poor ball-contact. As the golfer practices more, which entails hitting hundreds of golf balls over a period of time, he will begin to make more shots with "good" ball-contact, meaning that the club is striking the ball so that the ball, at impact, is in the center of the clubface. This "good contact" has a distinct feeling, to blind and sighted golfers alike, and as the beginner blind golfer becomes familiar with this feeling, he has a much better idea of what, exactly, he is striving for.

When making a golf swing, then, the blind golfer relies on feel. A swing may feel right or feel wrong, and the feel that a blind golfer experiences is determined a great deal by good or solid ball contact and by balance. For the blind golfer, balance is much more of a crucial aspect than for the sighted golfer. Sight gives a person balance. If a person has any focus - even if it is foggy vision with the golf ball being a blurry white spot - he has balance. The blind golfer refers to the brain/computer-eye which is absent for him. The lack of the computer-eye, which processes *optical flow* for the sighted golfer, makes it almost

impossible for the blind golfer to adjust his balance should he pass the point of being within his "balance zone". The balance zone is felt by the blind golfer mainly through his feet. It is first encountered in the set-up, when the golfer feels his weight distribution in his feet, and prepares to swing by feeling his weight primarily in the balls of his feet. This is comparable to many sports (such as tennis, baseball, volleyball) where the "ready" position has the player on the balls of his feet. Then the blind golfer must stay within that zone while executing his shot. If he does not feel within the balance zone during the set-up, then he will take the time before swinging to arrive at the balanced feeling. Sighted golfers often refer to this same process as "getting comfortable over a shot". Balance is likely the reason that a blind golfer will take more time during a particular set-up than during other set-ups, or he will occasionally back away from the ball and start the set-up routine again. Also, it is common in golf to take a practice swing prior to making the shot. Both the blind and the sighted golfer do this to reinforce their confidence about the feel for the correct swing, whereas, in addition, the blind golfer takes a practice swing prior to his shot to also feel how his balance is going to be on the shot, which is particularly important on uneven terrain.

3. BALANCE

Should the blind golfer pass outside of his balance zone (i.e. feel too much pressure in his feet one way or another), there is not much he can do in the way of correcting. For the sighted golfer, as he begins his swing and continues on, his computer-eye is constantly processing the visual information and making any necessary adjustments in order to maintain balance. But for the blind golfer who is unable to process his visual surroundings, the feeling of getting outside of the balance zone comes consciously and sometimes subconsciously as a wrong "this shot's in trouble" feeling, and he cannot adjust. If he attempts to make a correction, it is either an inaccurate adjustment or it does not come quickly enough. At this point, the blind golfer has much less of an idea about the results of his swing. To the sighted person, a comparable analogy might utilize the term "blackout". A common tendency when the blind golfer passes outside of his balance zone is to either decelerate or to "guide" the club through the swing, usually causing a poor shot.

The blind golfer might alter his swing as a result of trying to keep within the balance zone. Many blind golfers use a slightly more compact swing than the sighted golfer. For the blind golfer, the turn or rotation away from the ball in the backswing feels much greater than what it truly is. What is actually a rotation of the shoulders and hips feels more like a lateral movement away from the ball for many blind golfers. This can cause a feeling of not being able to return the clubhead back to the ball. Therefore, some blind golfers will tend to swing with a smaller arc (in the clubhead path) than the sighted golfer. He might also unknowingly swing the club on an improper path (either inside or outside the target line) in an effort to feel that he is maintaining balance.

Although balance is very crucial with every shot in blind golf (except, perhaps, putts), the blind golfer does not necessarily think about maintaining balance during his swing. He also does not think much about swing mechanics during the swing. Instead, after he feels balanced and ready to swing, he thinks more about tempo. This is comparable to golf with vision. Actually, the less a golfer thinks about mechanics, the better he will swing the club, in sighted and blind golf, alike.

4. SET-UP

The grip and set-up in blind golf, both static functions of performance, are taught simply by on-the-spot correction by the instructor. The grip is taught in the same fashion as done with sighted golf, however, the blind golfer has the disadvantage of not being able to do a visual check on the position of his hands, in relation to a proper grip and in relation to the clubface (being open, square, or closed to the target line). Again, he must rely solely on feel, with occasional corrections being made by the instructor.

The set-up involves many aspects. They include posture; distance from the ball; width of the stance; position of the ball in relation to the feet; shoulder, hip, and feet alignment; and position of the hands in relation to the ball. After the player has received instruction on and practiced all of these areas, much of the set-up becomes natural or automatic and needs only occasional correction. However, the position of the ball in relation to the feet, and the shoulder, hip, and feet alignment are checked by the coach in practically every shot that the golfer makes.

It should be noted that there is a general tendency for blind

golfers to make one particular error in setting up to the ball. That is, namely, setting up with open shoulders and hips (this means that the shoulders and hips are aiming left of the target for the right-handed golfer). It is not exactly known why this tendency exists, however there is one speculation. For the blind golfer setting up to a ball with his target straight out to his left, it may feel to him that the target is actually slightly behind his left shoulder rather than directly left of it. Therefore, he opens his shoulders because this is what "feels" square to (or aiming at) the target. Many players will, as part of their set-up routine, have their coach place a club across their shoulders or hips, pointing to the target, to help get a feel for proper alignment.

A proper set-up is of extreme importance to the blind golfer. He may have a flawless swing, but with an improper set-up, the swing will likely produce a poor shot. The set-up routine should be consistent throughout the game. The player and coach work together to arrive at a routine which is short, few words are exchanged, and remains consistent from shot to shot. Not only does this save time, but it promotes confidence in both the player and the coach. A consistent routine leads to consistent swings, which in turn, lead to consistent results.

In comparison to sighted golf, blind golf has many similarities and, conversely, many differences. For example, in golf with vision, an errant shot is most likely the result of an errant swing. In blind golf, however, the error may also be the result of a poor swing, but could just as likely be the result of an error in judgment by the coach. These errors in judgment occur mainly in three ways. The coach may be inaccurate in positioning the player to the ball so that the player may not actually be aiming at the target. Or, the coach might incorrectly position the club behind the ball, so that the clubface is not aimed at the target. A third possible error in judgment which differentiates blind from sighted golf is the coach's information about distance.

5. DISTANCE

Distance is one of the most critical aspects of blind golf, and the player must devote much time to learning distances. This is best achieved on the practice range with the instructor or the coach. The learning of distances of golf shots is most easily accomplished by having the coach or instructor, while on the

practice tee, inform the player of the distance that each "well-hit" shot has traveled. Through much repetition, the golfer can begin to associate a particular swing-feel with a particular distance. At the same time, coaches that are assisting in this type of practice are gaining confidence in their knowledge of distance. This concept is of most importance with shots of less than 100 yards. However, as with sighted golfers, a blind golfer learns fairly precisely how much distance he can expect from each club when the ball is struck well with a full swing.

When the team of player and coach approach a shot, the primary bit of information that the coach must give the player is the distance required for the shot. At times, it is the only information that the player desires after making the club selection and getting set up to the ball. Sometimes, too much added information can cause confusion or instill a lack of confidence within the player.

Distance is something with which the blind golfer becomes acutely precise, contrary to most sighted golfers. A sighted golfer cannot likely understand, for example, what 158 yards truly is. He may know that, for him, it is the distance produced by a well-hit 7-iron, or by a slightly less-than-full swing with a 6-iron, but it is not probable that he can comprehend 158 yards without seeing it. A sighted golfer uses his vision much in the way that other athletes use vision. For example, a wide receiver on a football team does not react to a thrown football by thinking, "OK, I need to run three paces this way and then jump for the catch on the fourth step." He merely reacts to the situation through visual perception, with no particular distance in mind. The same is done on the golf course by the golfer with vision. He will analyze the situation through visual receptors, and react accordingly by swinging the club in a manner that will produce the shot decided upon through his vision. On the other hand, with much practice a blind golfer becomes proficient with knowledge of distances, merely because he is not dependent upon sight. He learns through "feel" and through "visualization of ball-flight" what certain distances are, and has a much greater comprehension of distance than the sighted golfer. He comes to **know** what a 40 yard shot is, or a 20 foot putt is. Ironically, it may be the use of vision that blinds the sighted golfer of distance comprehension.

In playing a particular shot, then, in blind golf, the information that the golfer receives from his coach is very significant. Mainly, the golfer wants to know the distance needed for the shot. If the coach elaborates too much on a description of

the surroundings, it can occasionally be detrimental for the golfer. For example, the blind golfer does not really need to know about the sand bunker adjacent to the green, or on the left side of the fairway, or about the tree he must shoot the ball under. If the coach simply tells the player that he needs, say, a low 60-yard shot, this would probably be enough information for the golfer (perhaps the golfer may ask, "How low?"). If the coach does provide extra information, it is helpful to the player to hear the distance as the final piece of information. The distance, then, will be the key thought in his mind when executing the shot.

6. PUTTING

In putting, too, there are differences between blind and sighted golf. In sighted golf, the two main thoughts in preparation for a putt are "distance" and "direction". It differs slightly in blind golf. The blind golfer does rely on his coach for direction of the putt. But the player, himself, thinks about direction, too. In an indirect way, the player involves himself in direction when he thinks about taking a smooth, "straight", stroke. As far as distance is concerned, the player learns extremely well how to judge distance without eyesight. As in longer shots, the blind golfer has learned to associate a feel with various lengths of putts. However, the length of the backswing in a putting stroke is most often based on the length of a putt, and blind golfers have difficulty knowing the length of their backswing. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see a blind golfer move the putter away from the ball in the takeaway, keeping the putter in contact with the ground. This aides him in better judging the length of his backswing. The error signals that a blind golfer receives in putting involve distance. The golfer will frequently feel that he failed to take the putter back the correct distance for the length of the putt. Even using techniques such as the one described above does not always ensure that the length of the backswing will be appropriate.

Another frequent error is taking the putter back offline (not on the target line). What feels straight to the blind golfer may actually be inside or outside the line of the putt. This will likely cause a putt to miss the target to the right or left.

Some blind golfers like to walk the distance from their ball to the hole before putting. When doing so, they will count the number of paces. This allows the blind golfer to experience more

from the game, since he helps in determining the distance (including downhill and uphill adjustments) and the awareness of the speed needed because of breaks (areas not perfectly flat) in the green (a ball is said to "break" right or left when the putting surface is not flat, and the degree of break is largely determined by the speed of the ball).

7. COURSE MANAGEMENT

Course management involves decision-making aimed at reducing the number of strokes in a round of golf. The main principle of course management is to avoid trouble on the golf course. Trouble comes in the form of trees, water hazards, sand bunkers, and uneven terrain. A shot out of a trouble situation is one of the most difficult for the blind golfer, and for this reason, the blind golfer might declare his ball "unplayable" (with a one-stroke penalty) in a less extreme situation than the sighted golfer. When opting to play the trouble shot, precise communication between the coach and player is extremely important, and the safest and easiest shot will generally save strokes. Communication is also pertinent in making decisions about avoiding trouble. For example, using a 5-wood from the teeing ground rather than a driver will not result in as much distance, but will be less likely to put the ball into a trouble situation. Also, when the player receives information about distance, he will wisely ask if it is better to be a "little long" or a "little short" of the necessary distance, which is a common trouble-avoiding tactic. The decisions involved in course management hinge greatly upon the player's ability, both in general and for that particular day.

8. RULES

The United States Blind Golf Association members play golf according to the U.S.G.A. Rules of Golf. The only exceptions to these rules are found in: A Modification of the Rules of Golf for Golfers with Disabilities, 2001:

Definition of "Coach" -

A status of the coach and the duties which he may perform should be defined clearly. Without such clarification, it would be difficult, for example, to determine how a blind golfer must

proceed if his ball were to strike his or another player's coach after a stroke. Therefore, the following definition is suggested:

Coach

A "coach" is one who assists a blind golfer in addressing the ball and with alignment prior to the stroke. A coach has the same status under the Rules as a caddie.

Note: A player may ask for and receive advice from his coach.

Rule 6-4 (Caddie) -

There is nothing in the Rules which would prohibit the coach of a blind golfer from functioning as his caddie. For a variety of reasons, however, a coach may not be able to perform the duties of a caddie. Therefore, there should not be a prohibition against a blind golfer having both a coach and a caddie. In such circumstances, however, the coach may not carry or handle the player's clubs except in helping the player take his stance or align him as permitted by analogy to Decision 6-4/4.5. Otherwise the player would be subject to disqualification for having more than one caddie.

Rule 8-1 (Advice) -

In view of the Definition of "coach", it is suggested that Rule 8-1 be modified as follows:

8-1. Advice

A player shall not give advice to anyone in the competition except his partner. A player may ask for advice from only his partner, either of their caddies or, if applicable, their coaches.

Rule 13-4b (Grounding Club in Hazard) -

The following additional Exception under Rule 13-4 is suggested:

Exceptions:

....3. Provided nothing is done which constitutes testing the condition of the hazard or improves the lie of the ball, there is no penalty if a blind golfer grounds his club in a hazard preparatory to making a stroke. However, the player is deemed to have addressed the ball when he has taken his stance.

Rule 16-1f (Position of Caddie or Partner) -

Due to the complexities involved in aligning a blind golfer on the putting green, it may be difficult or unreasonable to expect the blind golfer and his coach to comply with Rule 16-1f. Therefore, there should be no penalty if a player's coach positions himself on or close to an extension of the line of putt behind the ball during a stroke played from the putting green provided the

coach does not assist the player in any manner during the stroke. However, given the intent of Rule 16-1f, it may be appropriate to prohibit a coach who is simultaneously functioning as a double caddie from remaining in a position which contravenes this Rule.

9. SUMMARY

The idea of blind golf is fascinating, and in fact, it is quite phenomenal that blind golf truly does exist and is not simply a concept. The differences between blind and sighted golf are numerous, as are the similarities. Probably the most notable difference between the two is the player/coach relationship that exists in blind golf. Because the player is very reliant on the coach for much of his needed information, clear and concise communication between them is essential. It would follow, then, that optimal communication exists between a player and a coach when the coach is one who is familiar with the player's game and is willing to participate as a coach on a regular basis. So essentially, blind golf requires the desire, commitment, and determination of two people with a common goal: the enjoyment of and success in a competitive sport.

All of the information gathered for this research paper was obtained through interviews with Bob Andrews, through the distinct privilege of coaching him on a couple of occasions; through articles from USBGA publications, including the newsletter "The Midnight Golfer," and through observations made at the USBGA National Championship held at Disney World in Orlando in November 1996.

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