

Know how, can do

In an effort to progress her golf game, editor Heather Kidd signs up for a South Island golf school

The question was straightforward but answering it took some deliberation: what do you want to achieve from attending golf school?

Where should I start? A number of things are hampering my progress in the sport – my swing; poor contact/topping of the ball; hitting the same distance no matter the club; an inability to work out what is wrong and how to correct mistakes; suspect stance and dodgy footwork. Oh dear, the list seems awfully long.

Maybe I should start at the start, at the place all golfers need to be confident – standing on the first tee. I want to be able to march onto the tee box, line up my shot and with a sure swing hit the ball clean down the middle of the fairway. Apart from that, maybe, just maybe, the wish list doesn't need to be pages long. I want to be a competent, confident golfer.

Arrowtown Golf Club pro Georgia Mahoney, a member of the LPGA, has just two-and-a-half days to turn my game around. Mahoney recently joined forces with Jack's Point, where she has use of the driving range and clubhouse to operate her golf school, aptly named Project Better Golf.

I book in for a course. The schedule is emailed to me and as I skim the pages I sense hard work lies ahead. The Saturday and Sunday are full on, 9am to 3pm at Jack's Point on Day One and 9am to 4pm on Sunday, the afternoon comprising nine holes played at Arrowtown. The Monday morning session is a three-hour review.

The course covers the fundamentals of golf – grip, aim and alignment, stance, posture, ball position, backswing, downswing, full swing visualisation, putting and the putting grip, chipping and chipping drills, the pitch shot and bunker play, downhill and uphill lies. It sounds a lot to take in, and more years than I care to admit to lie between the present and my days as a school pupil. How hard will it be to listen to information, roll it round the grey matter and put all the theory into practice?

It's too late to back out now. With golf clubs and gear packed and the words "have a nice holiday" from my work colleagues ringing in my ears, I board a flight to Queenstown.

Day One

Our group is small, just three of us (nowhere to hide), and my fellow class-mates are a couple from Christchurch, Paul and Felicity Clark. We assemble in the clubhouse and over coffee Mahoney introduces us to the other member of her Project Better Golf team, Louise Parker, a physiotherapist and Pilates instructor. Parker is going to take us through a series of warm-up exercises as well as give us a biomechanical assessment. Post-course we will receive a written report from Parker, an assessment of our physical frailties or otherwise, and exercises specific to our individual needs.

As we make our way across to the driving range, stopping to collect our golf gear from our vehicles, I feel the tension drain away. The mood is friendly and it is easy to relax, much easier than I had envisaged. As an occasional golfer, I'd arrived in Queenstown feeling somewhat intimidated at the thought of two and a half days immersed in the sport, plus concerned that my limited ability with golf club in hand might prove embarrassing. But I quickly discover that Paul, Felicity and I are on a level playing field as far as having aspects of our game we want to improve. Whether or not the others hit longer, straighter or better than I do is irrelevant before we tee up our first ball.

But first things first, Parker needs to see just how flexible or not we are and she puts us through our paces, a five-minute warm-up that our golf school booklet says is "designed to enhance the brain and body connections leading to a pain free and ultimately more powerful game of golf". Sounds like a good plan.

Parker guides us through six exercises: spine rotation, marching cross, lawn sprinkler, the invisible ball, target practice and top-tapping dancer. Without a doubt it is the target practice exercise that makes an impression on us. It goes like this: start by testing how far you can look over your right shoulder, take note of what you can see. Place both arms out in front of you, turn your arms inwards until your palms are facing, with your right wrist over the top of the left. Lean your head to the right.

Make smooth clockwise circles, starting small and increasing in size with each repetition. Once the circles are soccer ball size (approximately 15) change to counter-clockwise, and gradually decrease the circle size. Stop, place your arms by your side and look over your right shoulder. Repeat with your head leaning to the left and your left hand uppermost.

The result is amazing. It's a genuine 'wow' moment, with all three of us having a much greater range of movement. The exercises also highlight the importance of being well warmed up before picking up a golf club and demonstrate clearly that a more flexible golfer is likely to be a better and bigger hitter of the ball. It's commonsense, of course, but it makes one think about the number of times we've gone out to play, hurried to the first tee without doing a thorough warm-up or having a few practice swings, and been expecting that we will hit a first shot a pro would be proud of. Reality check: it's not going to happen.

Exercises over, Mahoney instructs us to take a golf club, have a few swings and as we warm to the task take a bucket of golf balls and set to work. Mahoney and Parker watch us closely, make a few observations and then take a camera to capture our golf swings on film. That done, we head back to the clubhouse to view the results.

Seeing myself on video, a couple of things are immediately apparent. My stance is wrong, I'm too close to the ball, and my weight is on the wrong foot. Also, my right foot is turned out, something I have never been aware of. My aim and alignment need work and I must become more conscious of my posture. Parker comments that I have the tell-tale hunch of someone who spends a lot of time sitting in front of a computer. Her words make me stand up straight.

After lunch we head back to the driving range and spend two hours working on full swing, chip and pitch

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shots. My problems with topping the ball don't magically disappear and Mahoney tells me to "brush the grass". She suggests I shorten my swing, both the backswing and the follow-through. It may not be orthodox but, hey presto, it works.

That problem sorted, there's yet another to fix. I'm taking too much time over the ball, a trait I share with one of my classmates. Mahoney tells us "think box, play box", in other words divide your shot-making into two zones – one for preparation and one for action, and once you move from the first there's no time for dallying, it's up and hit the ball. Confidence should not be an issue; prepare well and good execution will follow.

With so much to assimilate, by 3pm I'm exhausted. But it's a happy tiredness as I feel much has been achieved. We troop back to the clubhouse and sup a well-deserved beverage before heading away to our respective accommodation.

Day Two

Mahoney has branded this Moving Day and with justification – there's certainly not much standing around. In fact, early on we head out on the course, taking golf carts up to the 16th fairway where we get a lesson on uneven lies. Back at the driving range we practise chipping, working hard to get the tick-tock motion right, playing a game of leapfrog where we chip to just a few feet away and aim subsequent balls on the same path but further and further away. Then it's over to a bunker where we line up row upon row of balls and endeavour to hit them out of the sand and onto the green.

The morning speeds by and after another delicious lunch at Jack's Point we head to the picturesque Arrowtown Golf Club. Mahoney has given each of us a number of tasks for the day. Mine is to try and make clean contact with the ball, to "sweep the grass", and to put my shot preparation firmly in the



Heather gets advice from Georgia at the Arrowtown golf course.

'think' and 'play' boxes. Felicity has aim, alignment, posture and swing on her list and Paul has to work on his rotation and be mindful of his positioning, to stand further away from the ball.

It's a busy day at the club but Mahoney quickly rounds up a couple of carts and we head to the first tee. My moment of truth has arrived. Pulling my driver from my bag I approach the tee box, muttering the words "think box, play box" as I push my tee into the ground. I take a practise swing and line up my shot. I approach the ball, position my feet, check my weight is on the correct foot and move into my golf swing. There's a satisfying sound of club-ball contact and my ball soars in the direction it was aimed. Is this an easy game or what?

Actually... no. Despite a promising start, my game doesn't live up to my

expectations. It's hot as hell in the canyon-like fairways that are such an attractive part of Arrowtown's front nine. I don't know if it's information overload, tiredness or the heat that is causing me to wilt but I'm frustrated to the point of having to blink away tears halfway round. As my game gets worse, Paul and Felicity seem to step up a gear. Paul hits some great shots, especially from the tee, and Felicity finds her touch when it comes to approaches to the green.

We take a time out on the ninth and make the climb to the men's tee simply to savour the view. Looking around it is impossible not to be restored to good humour. So what if my golf game is somewhat ragged. I have made progress, the day is idyllic, the scenery breathtaking, and I'm in the company of three exceptionally pleasant people.

Day Three

First up, we take a tour of the Jack's Point course. It's closed for maintenance so we have the place to ourselves. We stop for a

camera opportunity at the par-3 seventh, posing so we have Lake Wakatipu behind us. A stiff breeze sweeps in from the water, a reminder that there is nothing benign about this course when the wind is up. We stop again on the long par-5 14th and Mahoney takes the opportunity to discuss club selection when facing an uphill lie and with a number of bunkers between golfer and the green to factor in.

Back at the driving range we get busy. Mahoney is adamant practice must be done with a purpose. For me it is six balls to warm up, club to ball, six balls where the focus is on the club sitting flat on the ground – which also helps my posture become more upright, six balls to the follow-through position and then 20 balls 'think box, play box', with a different target for each ball. That done, we move on to teeing it up with any club of choice. It is here I experience a real breakthrough because with each club I use, the distance achieved is noticeably different. Not only that, my ball striking is markedly

better than the previous day. My confidence soars along with the balls that disappear into the distance.

It's with a certain reluctance that we pack our big guns away and head back across the driving range to the putting green. After all, there's no sound as satisfying as the pure connection between golf club and ball. But as Mahoney points out, putting is 40 per cent of the game.

I'm a work in progress when it comes to putting. The tick-tock motion so effective in the short game applies on the green as well and although I can do the tick, I need more tock. It's going to take more than half an hour to solve my putting issues but with lunch at the clubhouse beckoning I'm happy to put the clubs in the boot of the car and go celebrate my 'graduation' along with Paul, Felicity, Mahoney and assorted guests.

Report Card

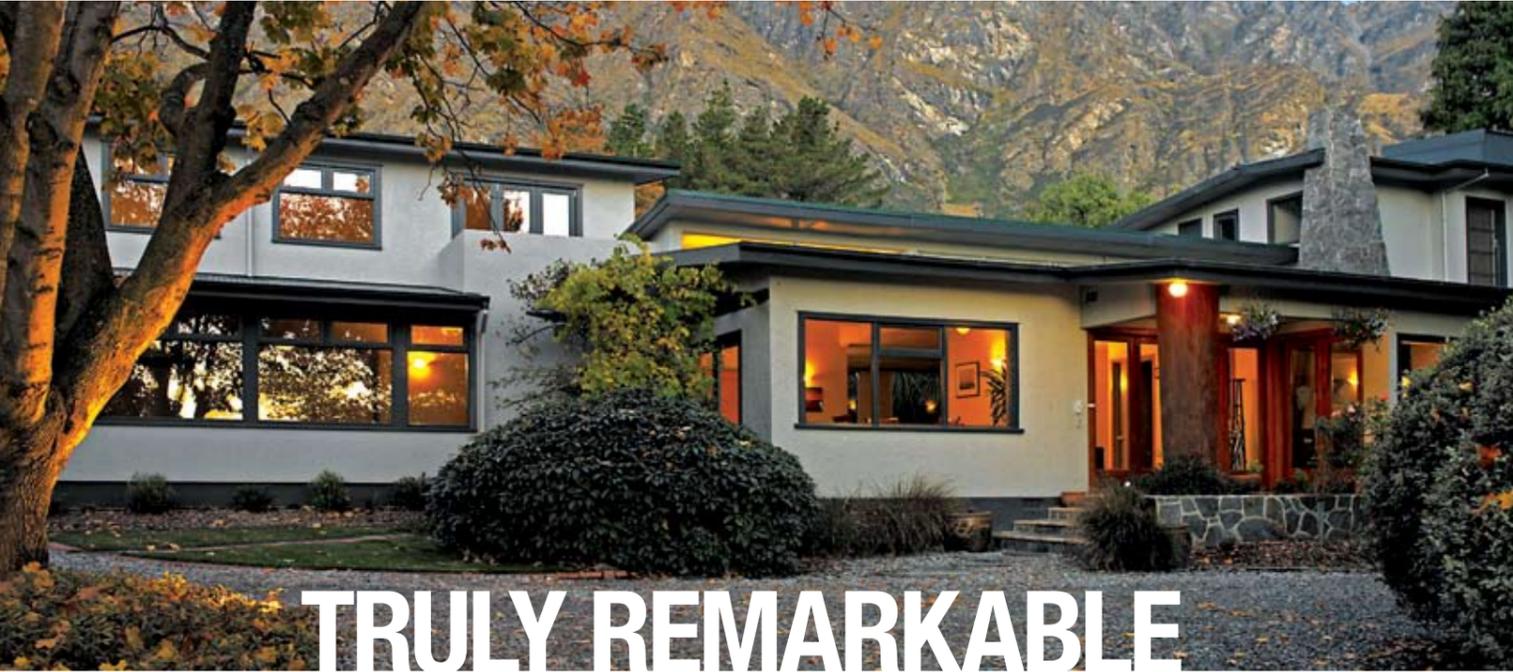
What were the benefits of golf school? Spending two-and-a-half days working on my game has made a huge difference. After a shaky start (nine agonising holes at Wanaka the next day followed, thankfully, by a much improved showing at Millbrook a day later) I now hit consistently longer and straighter, and when things go awry I have the knowledge to help me get the majority of my game back on track. Unfortunately, putting remains my bogeyman and that blot on my game is wrecking my scorecard.

Despite my initial misgivings, taking part in golf school was a lot of fun. Paul and Felicity were great company and Mahoney has a pleasant, informal touch that makes her instruction easy to follow.

Upon our arrival at Jack's Point, the 'students' received a comprehensive booklet on all aspects to be covered in the course and a couple of weeks later a detailed outline of what we'd done and the specifics of what we needed to work on was emailed to each of us along with the physiotherapist's report and exercise advice.

Would I recommend golf school? Absolutely. In fact, there's already been talk of our class of 2010 meeting up later in the year for a refresher course. ●

FOOTNOTE: For information about Project Better Golf, contact Georgia Mahoney at georgia@georgiagolf.co.nz; visit www.georgia.golf.co.nz or phone 021 627 004.



TRULY REMARKABLE

The Remarkables Lodge, tucked behind a tree-lined road frontage, sits like a stately matron, solid and welcoming, while around her pretty young things in the shape of the garden glow in late afternoon sunshine. The seclusion and quiet bodes well for an enjoyable stay.

The lodge, based on a design by world-famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright, is a significant building in the region, built on the Remarkables Station which was founded by Queenstown's first European settler William Rees. He would surely applaud the adventuresome spirit shown by the lodge's owners Brian Savage and Colleen Ryan. Originally from Great Britain, the pair spent years at sea and their many voyages included a trip to New Zealand timed to coincide with Team New Zealand's defence of the America's Cup. Having watched Sir Peter Blake and his team successfully retain sailing's most prestigious trophy, the couple sailed back to the UK. But they weren't there for long. Making the decision to come

ashore permanently, they chose to put down roots in New Zealand, where they bought the Remarkables Lodge.

The 1930s homestead has been refurbished and extended over the years but sympathetic renovations ensure its quintessential charm remains. There are seven generously proportioned bedrooms with en suites that hark back to a bygone era and include a claw-foot bath.

But no matter how comfortable the room, how fabulous the food, how convivial the hosts and how interesting the company, the absolute show-stopper is the scenery. What a backyard! The Remarkables range fills your vision, walls of grey granite-like slabs soaring skywards. When snow-covered in winter, they must look... remarkable. If you can tear yourself away from the view there is plenty to do both at the lodge and beyond the front gate. The Jack's Point golf course is literally across the road, its entrance way mere metres away. If golf is not your game and you want to engage

in more leisurely pursuits than the many extreme sports Queenstown is famous for, there's no need to venture from the property. Tennis, swimming, croquet, petanque, snooker, a spa and a sauna are available to guests. The lodge also has a well-equipped library and a paved courtyard out back offers a welcome retreat.

Your hosts are always on hand to make sure you have everything you need – coffee, tea, a cool drink and homemade biscuits on offer throughout the day, and the well-tended herb garden receives frequent visits from the chef. Breakfast and dinner is included in the room rate and utmost care is taken to ensure meals meet with guests' satisfaction. Pre-dinner drinks are served in the bar, and with Brian pouring the drinks it isn't long before guests are chatting to each other like lifelong friends.

The Remarkables Lodge offers Jack's Point and Queenstown Golf packages. For more information, visit www.remarkables.co.nz or phone 03 442 2720. ●

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