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Fit To Be Tee'd

A look inside the TPI fitting experience

By Ken Van Vechten
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If a picture is worth a thousand words, what does two-angle video reveal? Well, if Bobby Jones was around to take a gander at me, he'd be moved to say, "He plays a game with which I am not familiar, which makes sense since it bears a striking resemblance to lumberjacking."

Welcome to my golf swing.

Titleist Performance Institute (TPI) is a cradle-to-grave interdisciplinary diagnostic and teaching program embracing fitness, flexibility, club-fitting, instruction and, in some cases, nutritional analysis. Participants can choose from some or all parts of the café plan, partaking of single-installment to multiday sessions. Yet all are grounded in the understanding that golf is a physical activity, and 45 days with Butch Harmon, Hank Haney and Sean Foley won't a Tiger make if your body can't do what the swing philosophies demand.

In one last desperate effort to get to “familiar,” I set an appointment for a half-day session of TPI therapy at Palm Desert Golf Academy.

Testing

We first began with some physical assessments. The good news, PGA Class- and TPI-certified instructor [Paul Bucy](#) tells me, is that I have excellent balance and lower-body strength. The counterweight comes in the guise of, well, excess weight, core instability, and shoulder, leg and particularly hip flexibility that are on the octogenarian side of the divide. He knows this from me grunting and groaning through a series of tests (stretches and static positions) designed to tell him what moves and what doesn't. He says I'm far from atypical and that hips “are the number-one physical limitation, especially with men.” Misery loves company. The golf swing loves Elvis-ian hips.



After that, we hit the range and recorded my first hitting session. Head-on and down-the-line video reveals a solid starting position, and I hit my usual mix of notable and regrettable shots—a two-way miss of pull hooks and occasional weak, high blocks. Not surprisingly, the camera shows I'm off plane, my hand position is too high, and my posture goes on walkabout on the way back and never returns. “Fast hands and good timing,” says Bucy, “allow me to save shots.”

Diagnosis

At this point, Bucy has been collecting data, both from my physical tests and real-live outdoor golf ball hits. He's able to see right away that my swing flaws trace back to a deeper problem than just my current set of equipment and swing mechanics: sheer physical limitations on my part. I'm not an uncoordinated oaf or too dense to get the drill-instructor-like commands of myriad instructors. Instead, my body simply can't do some of the things that are at the foundation of a good golf swing. Core weakness and inflexibility inhibit my ability to turn and to remain down and in position through the swing; I can't help but hit the ball out on the toe, and sometimes all over the yard. Unlike a standard clubfitting experience, or even a regular golf lesson, I've actually learned that my body is the root cause of my swing problems, and my poor swing habits are compounding the problem.



Prescription

Bucy sends me back out on the range, this time equipped with the Orange Whip (orangewhiptrainer.com). It's a training and fitness tool that helps me swing more on plane, smoothen out my tempo and rhythm, and also helps me release my hands more properly. I certainly won't get in shape or channel Anthony Kim between video sessions using it, but Bucy goes for a little counterengineering. He knows if

I swing on plane, rhythmically and in position, what's essentially a long, heavy, flexible golf shaft with a weight on the end will produce fluid rotation, delayed hand release and a good posted-up finish, and I'll feel and "learn" the tactile sense of the direction in which my swing and posture need to go.

I swing the Orange Whip, Bucy films, and after a short while, with my hands low and in a better position, Bucy and I go back inside and review the footage of my swinging the Orange Whip and compare it to the swings from before. With the Orange Whip swinging back, I could see some pretty drastic improvements, mostly concerning my spine angle and how little I popped up through the downswing. The Orange Whip seemed to work, and as Bucy explains, he's able to integrate not just the Orange Whip, but also a variety of training aids and routines to help all golfers start seeing improvements. In my case, the Orange Whip was the right one for me, but for another golfer, a different type of training aid or exercise or tip will be prescribed.

After working with Bucy, the Orange Whip and using his swing tips and advice, I hit more balls. As far as immediate improvements? I saw speckles of light, but I didn't go from a 14 handicap to a 4 in a matter of minutes, that's for sure. On a number of shots, I expectedly reverted to my old form. Yet enough 6-irons are painting the flag 175 yards away, drawing nicely en route, to indicate there is something to all this. I know now I need to get in shape to play better, and I need to fix a few areas of my swing.

Rehab

After I hit a series of shots on a lie board and a launch monitor, and on a real-live green-grass range, Bucy, who is fitting-certified by Titleist, PING, TaylorMade and Adams, tells me I'm in a good spot fit-wise with my current sticks, from length and lie to flex and driver loft. Not perfect, but good in the sense that I can hold onto my clubs for a while and, instead, hone in on my core strength and better swing fundamentals. Yet, I couldn't help think, if I still get a lot of toe hits, shouldn't length and lie angle be jacked up farther?



According to Bucy, not necessarily.

Not long ago, I went through a fitting session with one of the major OEMs. The impact tape and ballflight suggested even more length and even more upright lie angles, almost to the point where I was heading off to terra incognita. This fitting was, essentially, a retail exercise, and not the place to address swing flaws. So the immediate goals for me were to “find” new clubs and for me to “be happy” with them, with happy being, for many buyers, a Band-Aid® fix that certainly will help them beat the ball around better as it masks deep-seated faults.

For reconstructive surgery, fitting needs to be done in conjunction with an honest, complete assessment of your game and where you want to take it, and your commitment to actually making that a possibility, even if that means losing the spare tire you said you’d lose several class reunions ago. And that’s the essence of TPI—an improving golf swing has an ecology where everything is interrelated.



“We can do a lot with equipment to address swing flaws,” Bucy suggests, “and that’s all some people want. Practice, working out—there’s a lot of commitment involved. Some people don’t have time to practice. Some don’t want to go to the gym. There’s nothing wrong with that approach. We need to work with people, not give them the hard sell.”

After talking with me about my goals, assessing my strengths and weaknesses, analyzing my video, and, I assumed, making a little pop-psych guesstimation as to my I-really-wanna-improve quotient, Bucy suggested I was a prime candidate to make my body and swing conform, not my equipment; so we kicked to the curb any consideration of 1-inch long and 4° up nonsense. We did decide the graphite has to go, and after trying 10 or 12 brand/flex combos, we settle on KBS Tour shafts.

Prognosis

This is not a one-and-done fix. TPI provides a road map. As with any such attempt at personal improvement, it’s up to me to unfold that map, see the starting point, identify the destination and accept there are real steps to undertake to get there.

I have my own page at mytpi.com, and it includes Bucy’s fitness assessment outlining what isn’t working so well and why (and what is). As with all TPI patrons, my web home also addresses “My Golf Fitness Handicap”—I’m a bit more than a half-stroke better than “bogey”—and offers 17 exercises and stretches chosen specifically for my shortcomings, with video demos and a workout schedule. A cool feature is “View MySwing,” where you can download and save video for analysis; I’m using it with my usual instructor. And the site has links to ask questions of TPI-approved instructors, trainers and medical professionals, and to access an exhaustive library of articles.

Again, it’s not automatic, and it’s up to me to work it. And guess what? I can’t wait to get started.

Scheduling An Appointment

Is this for you? Any player, regardless of handicap, would benefit from bringing the disparate parts of golf under one roof. Bucy's program at Desert Willow, like many "satellite" TPIs, is complete, if not as exhaustive as what can be had at Titleist's Oceanside, Calif., campus. His two-hour TPI Full Swing/Golf Flexibility Program costs two-and-a-half Bens and includes full-swing review, video analysis, fitness assessment and a personalized MyTPI workout program. The academy offers instruction geared to where the body is going, and a through-the-bag fitting runs \$150 for a few hours of work—remember, no nets here—and launch monitor. Consult www.mytpi.com for TPI professionals near you, including TPI-certified medical and fitness practitioners who can coordinate their services with clients following a TPI regimen.

For the ultimate experience, consider the half-, two- or, most definitely, three-day program at Titleist HQ. The latter, at \$6,500+, serves up 3-Dimensional Motion Capture Body-Swing Analysis, video filming and review, equipment workup and custom-fitted Titleist/Vokey/Cameron clubs, golf-ball testing, skills assessments, complete physical evaluation and workout profile, nutrition counseling, and instruction in all aspects of the game. "You'll be pampered like a Tour professional," Bucy says.

Does it include a bit of Furyk's season-end bonus? One can wish.

The Editor's Perspective:

What Comes First? Clubfitting Or Golf Instruction?

It wasn't until I, along with Ken, spent the day at the TPI at the Palm Desert Golf Academy, that I fully comprehended the relationship golf instruction can and should have with clubfitting. Like Ken, I went through the TPI process of physical assessments, a review of my shot tendencies and, finally, a look at the current makeup of my golf bag.

The process proved enlightening, especially the part where I learned that even though I have ample flexibility and strength to help me make a better golf swing, my glutes were the weakest aspect of my game, and I needed to train them harder in the gym (you can e-mail jokes to moll@golftipsmag.com, but trust me, I've already heard most of them). I was especially enthused by the series of workout tips I should follow, not to mention learning that my clubs happened to fit my game nearly perfectly (nothing beats that for some extra confidence). But what I really wanted to learn was how the TPI integrates golf instruction with clubfitting. Here's what I found.

I assessed Ken's situation. As Paul evaluated Ken's physical ability and later video-recorded Ken hitting balls with his current set of clubs, he began developing an idea of training aids, exercises and swing fixes that would be best for his swing. This is where things got really interesting. Paul then conducted a short trial-and-error session with a few different clubs, using both Ken's clubs and some new clubs with different lie angles—i.e., the kind of clubs that would normally be prescribed to Ken had he just seen a clubfitter who based his fitting advice solely on Ken's shotmaking results and not on his fitness level or swing ability. As Ken continued to hit golf balls

(sometimes using a lie board to see exactly where the club was making contact with the ground), Paul was observing the ballflight, as well. Turns out, even with clubs slightly more suited for his swing, Ken was still hitting pulls and pull hooks to the left. Hence, Paul's advice to Ken was to keep hold of his current clubs until he's in better shape to make better golf swings first, then maybe think about making changes to his club set.

You see, in Ken's case, even with better-fitted golf clubs, he still had work to do on his golf swing if he truly wanted to see improvements. This kind of open honesty not only is refreshing, but also is the truth for most folks who want to play better golf. Now, Paul did prove to me that clubfitting definitely can have lasting, and sometimes immediate, effects on some golfers, but for others like Ken, it's only one part of the equation. For them, a more comprehensive program such as the TPI regimen (fitness, swing and clubfitting) is what's required for a total fix.

I suppose the moral of Ken's story is this: Don't rush to a clubfitter and expect miracles; rather, first consult with your instructor for advice on what kinds of swing fixes you'll need to play better. Once you do that, then see a clubfitter and be sure to speak your mind. Tell the fitter what you're working on, what you want to accomplish and so on. After a fitting, go back to your swing instructor so he or she can help you take your properly fitted clubs and make the most of them and your golf swing. This advice is particularly sensitive for mid- to high-handicappers with more room to improve. Better players are more likely to adjust faster to new equipment and start seeing more dramatic results from just a clubfitting experience than, say, a higher-handicapper will.

So, start with a swing lesson, get your clubs fit, then get to work on your golf swing with the help of an instructor. Do things in that order, and you'll see better results. Or, kill all three birds with one stone and find the closest TPI nearest you.

—Ryan Nol

*Learn more about the **Palm Desert Golf Academy** at Desert Willow Golf Resort, Palm Desert, Calif., by contacting (760) 340-4057 or www.palmdesertgolfacademy.com.*