



An old club can be used to 'feel' swing plane in the water. Australian amateur Tim Stewart is practising his swing while standing in a pool (doing this while kneeling in the shallow end is also recommended). This gives him great feedback on his body positions due to the resistance of the water.

Pool therapy for golfers

Water is not always a hazard! Here's how to use a swimming pool to help your golf.

I've long held the belief that water is a great medium to train for golf. I view 'hydrotherapy' as a great 'circuit breaker' from practising hard out on the course. Golfers are prone to lose movement and posture because they're stuck in fixed positions, which is a constant occupational hazard in the same way that policemen get flat feet or pheasant pluckers get sore wrists.

The beauty of water is that it promotes movement and allows you to work three-dimensionally in a safe environment. I recommend drills that activate the 'backward' primal muscles because we tend to overuse the 'frontal' muscles groups, which gets us into fixed, flexed posture.

Water benefits all levels of golfer. Tour players can use a hotel pool as an alternative form of golf-specific training. Or they can use it just for relaxation. With their amount of tournament golf and extensive travelling, 'hydrotherapy' is a good recovery strategy, especially for jetlag. And, it's especially good therapy for juniors who lead a sedentary lifestyle and carry large objects such as schoolbags and laptop computers.

It's well documented that ancient spa pools are revered for their healing properties when the water is heated to a certain temperature. The heat allows you to maintain a range of movement in the joints that are stiff, allowing more rotation in the golf swing. It improves circulation, which is important as you get older and for seniors with arthritis.

Importantly, water has less shock absorption on the body. There is less impact pressure on the joints by comparison with running or an

aerobic workout in the gym. With less shock going through the body, golfers won't feel as sore or stiff the next day after a water workout.

In general, water improves balance and range of mobility because of the buoyancy of the water. And, the turbulence can be harnessed to provide resistance, so you can challenge and strengthen muscles through that turbulence.

Perfect strokes

Swimming is a great way to get fit but it's important for golfers to realise which strokes are best. Poor swimming technique may hurt your golf because there is a tendency to overcompensate and get too 'army'. In fact, Sam Snead said he would never swim before playing golf because he felt it affected his arm positions in the swing. It makes them feel as though they're disconnected.

That's why I urge professional golfers not to do too much freestyle. They already tend to have tightness in their pecs and upper trapezius muscles because they're constantly leaning over when practising their short games. Amateur golfers also tend to have hunched postures, although that tends to come from sitting at a desk all day in a workplace environment.

Freestyle reinforces that flexed posture, which is constantly under load. With freestyle, or front crawl, there is a tendency to stick your neck in one fixed position. For the same reason, I wouldn't recommend butterfly. Once again, that reinforces a flexed posture. And, the emphasis on forceful, arm movements in butterfly will have a detrimental affect on your golf.

My preference is breaststroke because it requires more shoulder-girdle stability and keeps your shoulder blades and neck in a 'good' controlled position. Backstroke is excellent, too, because it counterbalances the muscles that we use on a daily basis and when over-practising.

Personally, I tend to use a mixture of breaststroke and Australian crawl with my swimming. I like breaststroke for the upper body, but attach flippers onto my feet and use a traditional freestyle kick with my lower body. I do this to integrate the trunk and pelvic muscles, which allows the legs to move faster and build the fast-twitch muscles. I also try to squeeze the thighs together to enhance lower-body control, essential for all golfers.

In terms of duration, I advise elite golfers to do several short bursts, really fast. After coming off a long plane flight, a rapid workout tends to 'clean out' the body's toxins, rejuvenating circulation and stimulating the brain. But the emphasis must be on a controlled stroke when swimming.

Feedback from the water

Another aspect of hydrotherapy is that it can be used to visualise and 'feel' swing concepts in the water. In the accompanying pictures, former Australian Amateur champion Tim Stewart is demonstrating how you can better understand swing plane by using an old club in a pool.

Tour players like this exercise because they can actually see the face of the clubhead and gain feedback about swing plane as it travels

through the water. This also allows them to feel the resistance of the clubhead, which isn't apparent when practising out on the course.

This technique places emphasis on slow controlled movement as the clubface moves through the water. There is no thrashing or excessive splashing. As the club comes out of the water, a controlled 'impact splash' is emphasised to ensure body and clubface are in synergy.

Players can 'feel' their body positions as they come into impact and better understand the role of the legs in the golf swing. Many of the European Tour players that I advise regularly use water to monitor their swings.

It's best to start these drills while kneeling in the shallow end of a pool, before progressing to deeper water at nipple height. I think it's a great way to get a group of players working together, such as a pennant team. For safety, shortened clubs or posture bars are recommended instead of full-length golf clubs if more than one person is in the pool at the one time.

Next issue I'll go into more detail and show several drills using floats and kickboards in the pool. Usually, most people overuse their arms when they're swimming. By wearing floats on each arm and using kickboards, it helps to activate all of the 'Christmas Tree' muscles that are essential for good golf.

For advice on a golf-specific training program, contact Ramsay McMaster on 0407 432 282 or e-mail golfphysio@ozemail.com.au. To purchase a golfer's 'Fitness Survival Kit', call the Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic on (03) 9569 9448.

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