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PERFECT EXECUTION WITH THE NIBLICK

Each Shot with This Club Must Be Considered on Its Own Merits

By HARRY VARDON

There is a method of playing a shot out of a bunker which, in a general sense, is better than any other, but let me straightway warn the golfer against relying upon one manner, and one only, of recovering from places of tribulation on the links. It is an all too common error.

To a large extent every problem under this head has to be considered on its own merits. Much must be governed by the stance which circumstances force the player to adopt, and by the question as to whether he can afford to lose a stroke or ought to make a desperate effort to achieve that which is very difficult. On broad lines, however, it is possible to indicate the right and wrong ways of tackling the average situation in a hazard, and all that I would ask the golfer to remember is that, inasmuch as he has to adapt himself to the needs of the moment, he ought not to depend upon one stereotyped method of executing a bunker shot. As a rule, the position is one that calls for a choice from, among several plans of action. In America the sand in bunkers is usually much harder than it is exactly suited to the conditions which are common in inland bunkers.

"Don't be greedy in a hazard," is, perhaps, as good a piece of advice as any that can be given in regard to the accomplishment of recovery shots. There are occasions when one has to make a death-or-glory effort, but, in ordinary circumstances, it is safest in either a match or a medal round to look for the easiest way out and trust to making up the lost stroke at a later stage. Most of us have paid the penalty at some time or other of a vaulting ambition to do something wonderful in a bunker.

My unhappiest experience in this respect was in a professional tournament at Musselburgh a good many years ago. At the fourth hole, a short one, I was bunkered near the green. I tried to play a clever shot out with my mashie (very foolishly I carried no niblick in those days), with the result that I took three shots in the hazard. Then I went on to beach, from which place I found my way back into the bunker, in which I had had all the trouble.

The hole cost me nine, and I shall never forget the look of withering in Britain. The heat of the sun bakes the soil, and, as a consequence, the ball generally sits up fairly well, whereas, at home it sinks into the sand and is often half-buried.

These two sets of conditions call for different tactics. It has been remarked by some critics that when American golfers play in Britain, they do not show so much ability in recovering from bunkers as in the other shots of the game, and the reason is, I suppose, that when they tackle an English or Scottish seaside course, the fine, loose nature of the sand is something new to them. They try to pick the ball up cleanly, which is a sheer impossibility when the bottom of the ball is nestling well down in the sand.

In Britain, we have both sets of conditions. The sand is usually hard inland and loose by the sea. When the ball is sitting up on a firm surface, and a good deal of ground has to be covered, the thing to do - unless the position is very close to the face of the hazard - is to hit cleanly. But the shot is not the ordinary lifting one, nor is it a scoop, which is about the worst way imaginable of trying to get out of a bunker. It is a stroke made by addressing the ball with the hands a fraction of an inch in front of it, taking the club up as nearly straight as is humanly possible instead of after the manner of the driving swing, and aiming at the back of the ball—not even a thousandth part of an inch behind it. This principle will make it rise sharply and carry a considerable distance; it is the method adopted by every British professional of note and it is scorn on the face of my caddie as he said when the ball ultimately went down: "Ye'll have a niblick this afternoon, or I'll no' carry for ye." During the luncheon interval, he went off to obtain a niblick. He came back exceedingly intoxicated but bearing the instrument which he

had sworn to make me use. As I was lucky enough to win the tournament in spite of my morning mishap, he felt well repaid for his pains and even perhaps for his aching head on the following morning.

When a ball is lying heavily in sand or other soft substance, then undoubtedly the only way to dislodge it is to aim behind it, so that the club does not actually come into contact with the ball at all, but forces it out of its ensconced position by the violent disturbances of the soil behind the object. This is also a means of escape when the ball is lying cleanly, but so near to the face of the hazard that to play it out by direct impact with the club is almost impossible. Here, however, the player will have to be governed by circumstances. It may pay him better in a medal round, or when he has a stroke up his sleeve in a match, to play to the side or even back —anything so long as he makes sure of getting out of the bunker in one stroke.

Everybody who has studied books of instruction knows that the usual advice to a golfer in a bunker is to aim behind the ball, and I am certain that this procedure is often adopted when it is not necessary, as, for instance, when the ball is lying cleanly a yard or two from a fairly shallow face, and can be raised by a firm hit which produced back-spin - the stroke which I have described in another chapter. But where the expedient of aiming behind the ball commends itself to the golfer let him remember to bury the head of the niblick in the sand with all the power that he can command.

It is a very common error to aim behind the ball and then try to carry the club through. This will produce no effect at all, except to move the ball nearer to the face, the whole effort has to finish with the delving of the niblick-head into the sand. How far you aim behind depends upon the distance that you want to make the ball go. If you have only a few yards to travel, you can attack the sand three or four inches behind the ball. It is necessary to keep your vision fixed on that spot, and not to bother about the ball, which will come up all right if you hit with power.

A full swing is wanted, but not a round swing, like that adopted for driving. The movement of the club should be straight up and straight down, or as near to that as you can get.

Sometimes you bring up whole clouds of sand. James Braid plays this and other bunker shots perfectly. I remember it being said that when he recovered from the bunker at the seventeenth hole at St. Andrews in the open championship which he won there in 1905, he made the green tremble by the strength with which he dug into the soil in order to secure a shot of ten yards. At the finish there was almost as much sand outside the hazard as there was in it.

When he and I played a foursome against Duncan and Mayo at about the same period, I deliberately put my partner into the bunker on the left just below the pin at the short sixth hole at Walton Heath in each round. The green was so keen that we were almost certain to be in one or other of the bunkers, and I knew that Braid would put the ball near the hole from this particular hazard. He nearly emptied the bunker of sand, and we won the hole both in the morning and the afternoon.

Perhaps my own best bunker shot was accomplished in this way in a match with Braid. The occasion was the England vs. Scotland contest at Sandwich in 1904. We were all square driving from the last tee, and I put my tee-shot into the bunker guarding the green. The hole was shorter then than it is now. My ball was dead up against the face of the hazard, twenty yards short of the hole. I took what somebody described as "cartloads of sand," and up came the ball to drop within a few feet of the hole. That shot enabled me to halve the match. If you hit hard enough, and take plenty of sand, you can get the ball out of the most desperate looking position in a bunker.

Really, a more difficult shot is that from long grass. It is no use trying to nip in immediately behind the ball in the hope of executing something in the nature of a stab shot, as many players do. The roots of the grass will always check the pace of the club-head so effectually as to produce no result worth having.

Neither is an ordinary swing at the ball calculated to achieve the purpose; the club pushes the grass down on the ball and smothers it so completely that it cannot escape. The only way is to aim several inches behind (sometimes as many as four inches), cut right through the roots of the vegetation and take the ball in the course of the stroke. Naturally this calls for a shot in which the club-head travels in one plane for a longer distance than in any other stroke; it is moving parallel to the ground, and only just clear of it, for five or six inches. But unless you cut through the roots of the grass behind the ball you will never get that object clear of the entanglement. It is necessary to keep a very firm grip of the club to prevent it turning in the hands.

There are more varieties of long grass in America than in England and some of them are so stiff that a good deal of strength is required to carve a way through to the ball. Remember not to slow down until the follow-through is well under way; you want to swing as though you were slashing at the grass with a razor and determined to leave the reaper nothing to do in that particular spot. Above all, never lose your temper when you are in difficulties. Equanimity is half the battle. Some men there are who find it very difficult to remain calm and hopeful in a trying situation. The only thing to do when you see your ball disappear into an unpleasant place is to remember that many a hole is won when it looks lost beyond recall.

I used to know a clergyman who suffered unspeakable agony in his effort to control his feelings when he hit a ball into a bunker. In the graphic words of his caddie: "Big blue pimples would come out on his face and you'd think he was going to have a fit." In these crises, he always snatched from an inside pocket a prayer book and scurried forward reading it until gradually his rage subsided, and he found himself capable of tackling the situation with a tranquil mind. It must be for everybody to decide how he can best placate himself in such emergencies.

In long grass, one's fancy sometimes turns towards the mashie, but on the whole, the niblick is the best club to use when heavy recovery work has to be done. It should be a club with an unbendable shaft, and a stout head; it should be the heaviest instrument in the bag and some 16 or 17 ounces in weight. Even in the hands of the artist, it is intended for use as something of a bludgeon.

It is a fact - indisputable and inexplicable - that to thousands of golfers, the water hazard is the most awe-inspiring on the course.

Many a player who can look a bunker straight in the face, at the sight of a pond loses all confidence and promptly fozzles.

THE STANCE AND ADDRESS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE UP-SWING

When playing a niblick shot from a bunker the stance and address are much the same as for the mashie, with the important exception that the weight of the body must be thrown rather more on the left leg and at the beginning of the up-swing must be inclined even more so. As this is one of the few forcing shots in golf, the club must be held firmly.



TOP OF THE SWING

A decidedly more upright swing than for any other club, on account of the fact that the niblick must be brought down straighter so as to deliver the blow behind the ball instead of taking the latter cleanly off the ground.



START OF DOWN-SWING

The body, it will be seen, has inclined towards the hole, throwing most of the weight on to the left leg. In this position you are prevented from "scooping" at the ball, a fatal error when using this versatile club.



FINISH OF THE SWING

Nearly all the weight on the left leg and immediately behind the ball. The arms have been extended to almost their full length and the club head has delved into the soil behind the ball, forcing the latter into the air.

