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To improve posture, balance, flexibility, strength and control, golfers seek fitness programs that work from the inside out, enhancing performance and preventing injury.

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Swing technique and style is as unique as a player's fingerprints. Strength, power, flexibility, balance, core stability, body awareness, even endurance—all are physical traits that every consistent golfer (even the fair-weather players) must possess.

Testimonials to golf fitness are now seen all over television. It's talked about on the practice tee and in the clubhouse. Why so much talk about golf fitness? Is it really that important? And if so, what are the elements that make up a good golf fitness program—and how can paying attention to them help your members play their best golf?

The premise of specialized fitness programs is to first diagnose physical limitations, through a golf-focused fitness evaluation, that may be hampering play. These programs then come up with individualized plans to help reduce or eliminate those physical limitations and achieve optimal swing mechanics.

But to be fully effective—and profitable—golf fitness programs must be managed mutually, as the name implies, by both the golf and fitness departments, to properly marry all of the essential components for success.

Healthy Members, Healthy Profits

Woodhaven Country Club in Palm Desert, Calif., is home to a golf fitness program that is among the most comprehensive in the country. As director of the only state-of-the-art golf fitness center in the Coachella Valley, Steve Jacobson, Golf Fitness Trainer, extends his expertise to both club members and the public.

“The stronger you are and the healthier you are, the more likely you are to play golf,” says Jacobson, who boasts a +2 handicap and is a former club champion at Mission Hills Country Club in Rancho Mirage. “Our program helps golfers achieve certain predetermined goals that will improve their golf game, and their well-being.”

With Jacobson in the driver's seat, Woodhaven's golf fitness program seeks to help players with strength training, flexibility and weight-resistant exercises that mimic the specific movements involved with the golf swing.

“Pre-Tiger Woods, golf and fitness were rarely associated with one another,” explains Jacobson. “Clubs had fitness centers, but never with specialized equipment, and rarely with trainers who could effectively improve a client's swing. Now, fitness has been elevated to a new level and golfers are seeking specialized programs to help them improve their game and prevent injury.”

Make no mistake: Golfers, at any level, are athletes, and the golf swing requires a great deal of athleticism. The industry is littered with gadgets and gimmicks for increasing accuracy and shot



distance. Yet for all their claims and guarantees, most remain independently unproven.

Compare that to what can be achieved through a basic golf fitness program. Jacobsen starts by conducting a physical evaluation of the client's ability to perform certain tasks related to the swing. The information he takes away is like an MRI for a client's swing. If there's a physical problem, he'll diagnose it and begin a conditioning program designed to increase strength, flexibility and control, as well as cardio-fitness.

Garnering rave reviews from members and non-members alike, Woodhaven CC enjoys a seat of prominence and exclusivity, thanks to its golf-fitness program.

“I have about 40 clients,” says Jacobson. “Many are members at other high-end clubs in the area. They're looking for a program to improve their game, but their clubs don't offer anything of the caliber that we do.”

So the golf fitness program at Woodhaven CC has become a sales tool to build membership and generate incremental profit.

“The financial equation is simple,” says Jacobson. “Healthier golfers are more likely to play rounds, bring guests, and spend time—and money—at the club.”

Flexibility, Strength & Power

Golf doesn't require the same endurance of running a marathon, or the brute strength of bench-pressing 350 pounds. But during the three seconds it takes to perform a swing, a golfer who accelerates the club head to speeds of 90 miles an hour or more is putting a great deal of strain on a number of different muscles. A flexible and strong body is better protected from—and equipped for—the excessive forces of the golf swing than a poorly conditioned body.

Sean Cochran, one of the most recognized independent golf fitness instructors in the country, agrees.

“The execution of the golf swing requires certain levels of flexibility, strength, and power to execute it correctly,” Cochran says. “If these physical parameters are not 'up to par,' compensations will develop in the swing. This will result in inconsistencies, a loss of power and accuracy, and higher scores rather than lower ones.”

According to Cochran, who travels the PGA Tour regularly working with PGA Professionals (most notably two-time Masters and PGA Champion Phil Mickelson), a golf fitness program should incorporate five key components: flexibility, balance training, strength, endurance, and power training.

For amateurs, flexibility requires the most attention, says Cochran. It is also the starting point for any golf fitness program. “The mechanics of the swing requires the body to draw the club along a specified swing plane through a long range of motion,” he explains. “The goal is to improve the range of motion.”

Muscular strength, as it pertains to the golf swing, has to do with “the ability to execute the required force to maintain the anatomical requirements of the swing,” Cochran adds. Strength touches on a number of other points, such as balance, posture and endurance. “A golfer must maintain a fixed spine angle, rotate around that angle, and maintain specific postural positions in every phase of the swing,” he says.

Power development is measured through clubhead speed. “Power hinges on both the efficient execution of the swing and the muscles of the body to create the greatest amount of force,” says

Cochran, who suggests a number of fitness exercises such as the Physio-Ball Russian Twist Throw (at left) and the Single Leg Tubing Rotation to his clients.

The key, he says, is changing the program depending on the season, at least three times a year.

"I foresee golf fitness to be as important as lessons for the amateur golfer," says Cochran. "As additional research and advances are made, new techniques will be implemented into the pro level, which will inevitably trickle down."

Long-term, he agrees, fitness programs can only benefit the game and its players.

Bringing the Disciplines Together

At the Winchester Country Club in Meadow Vista, Calif., an expansive fitness center offers treadmills, cardio machines, cross-trainers and more to its members, along with free weights and exercise balls.



Kyle Bodyfelt, the club's Fitness Director, oversees a monthly golf fitness lecture series that is free to members and highly topical, with many specialized training programs on tap for the coming year.

"Every golfer is an individual with specific needs; I try to address those during an initial assessment," says Bodyfelt, a certified athletic trainer, licensed physical therapy assistant, and certified strength and conditioning specialist. "After reviewing health and exercise history, fitness/golf goals, and conducting a physical assessment, I then use the information to design a program that incorporates strength, flexibility, posture, cardiovascular condition, and even nutrition."

Bodyfelt, who isn't an avid golfer, works closely with Winchester's Head Golf Professional, David Reese, to design individualized programs specific to the game.

"I find David's perspective extremely helpful," says Bodyfelt. "By working together, we are able to bring each of our unique perspectives and skill sets to the development of member-specific programs. It's a very functional balance." For the club's upcoming lecture series, in fact, Bodyfelt and Reese are planning combined presentations.