

Steve Jacobson promotes a healthier approach to golf

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PALM DESERT - You're probably never going to be as fit as Tiger Woods, and you're probably never going to be able to hit a golf ball as far as the game's No. 1 player.

But, Steve Jacobson insists, if you improve your physical conditioning, you can be a better player. Or at least maintain your game against the ravages of age.

"This is really for the guy who is standing on the first tee on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and seeing his drive go from 220 (yards) to 200 to 180," said Jacobson, who pushes physical fitness for golf through his Tour Golf Fitness program. "What you want to do is stop or reverse that trend."

Jacobson has the sole desert franchise of Tour Golf Fitness, a program with powerful golf names behind it that promises to help players with strength training, flexibility and weight-resistant exercises that mimic specific movement of the golf swing.

Developed in part by fitness expert David Dize, the program has had consultation from teaching guru Butch Harmon, U.S. Open winner Tom Kite, golf psychologist Bob Rotella and players and official Vinnie Giles.

During a Monday presentation of the program to members of the Desert Chapter PGA at Woodhaven Country Club, the home of the program in the desert, Jacobson and Dize promised not to turn average golfers into pros, but to help recreational players and their teachers to improve the player's game through better overall fitness.

"The market we are looking at here, I would honestly say, is 50 to 75, which is a major part of the country club members," Jacobson said. "There are maybe declining in health, their golf swings are in steady decline. They have worked their lives to generate income so that they could retire and play golf. But because they don't play as well as they want, they don't enjoy it now."

Mike Shea, education director for the local PGA chapter, arranged for the seminar as part of ongoing education for local club and teaching pros because fitness is becoming a greater emphasis in golf.

"We can't dance around it any more," Shea said in front of about 20 chapter members at the seminar. "We can't put a gun to someone's head, but I think ethically we have to tell our students that if they lose that 50 pounds it would improve their game."

The Tour Golf Fitness program incorporates basic strength and flexibility training that might be featured in any fitness program. The difference comes from some patented equipment, including a stretching machine that has been used by NFL teams.

The main feature of the program, though, is a series of weight-resistant exercises worked off another patented machine. Through a series of weights, pulleys and hand-held equipment, the machine allows a golfer to work muscle groups by imitating the exact golf swing movements. Progress is measured through slowly increasing the weight used in the resistance, not by increasing repetitions of the swing movement.

"So we address the whole swing, the strength training program, the flexibility training program and then golf specific," Jacobson said.

Both Jacobson and Dise added that since the program is basically self-directed, a student could work out at any time, keeping his or her own progression charts without the need for a full-time trainer.

In addition to promoting the benefits of the program, Jacobson and Dise want to promote the program as an amenity for private country clubs. They hope that, for an investment of \$30,000 for equipment and marketing material, other private clubs will be inspired to put the fitness program in their clubhouses.

"It's for high-end clubs," Jacobson said. "There are a lot of clubs that have fitness centers, but they sit there empty because people won't do the exercises or invest the time without knowing they are getting something that will help their golf game. The reality is only about 15 percent of members use those facilities. This is something members will use."

Jacobson and Dise are convinced Tour Golf Fitness and other golf-related fitness programs will only grow in the coming years as the game's top golfers continue to prove the fitter golfer is the better golfer. Woods, for instance, debuted on tour in 1996 as a highly flexible but skinny 155-pound player. Now Woods is pushing 200 pounds, and Dise said Woods looks like he could put on a uniform and play any traditional team sport.

"You are starting to see the cream really separate themselves," Jacobson said. "The problem is there are guys who finish 100th on tour and make a million dollars and don't really care. If I can make a million on tour a year, why do I want to work out three or four times a week?"

That might be true for some recreational players who are only interested in the social aspect of playing with their friends, Jacobson admitted. But for those interested in maintaining their handicap or even improving their game, a program like Tour Golf Fitness can make the difference, he said.

"Eight percent to 90 percent of a (county club's) membership is made up of golfers," Jacobson said. "Why wouldn't you want to use something that is golf-specific?"