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18 Holes in 45 Minutes

What 'slow' players can learn from Christopher Smith, the world's fastest speed golfer

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

NORTH PLAINS, Ore.

Christopher Smith set the world speed-golf record three years ago at a tournament in Chicago. On a regulation course, he shot a six-under-par 65 in 44 minutes and 6 seconds, carrying only six clubs and sprinting between shots. Not only is this extremely cool, it's also instructive. Speed golf proves what most of us know intuitively: Thinking is the ruin of good golf.

"In speed golf you don't have the option to think," Mr. Smith said Monday as he prepared to demonstrate a few speed-golf holes. "All you have time to do is size up the situation, look at the target and hit the shot. So golf becomes a reactive sport rather than a deliberative one. It's more like tennis where you're responding to the something coming at you."

Mr. Smith, the 45-year-old lead PGA instructor at the Pumpkin Ridge Golf Club here, 15 miles west of Portland, has completed two marathons in under three hours, so the running aspect of speed golf came naturally to him. But he discovered, since taking up the sport about 10 years ago, that he often scores better in speed golf than he does playing normal golf (or slow golf, as he sometimes calls it). In more than 100 rounds at his home course, for instance, his lowest score is a 66 -- accomplished on the run, in 48 ½ minutes. Typical rounds at most courses take four hours or longer.

As a sport, speed golf has some practical drawbacks. The biggest is that players need something like 15 empty holes in front of them to start a round. Another is that golfers have to be fit, although not necessarily marathon-fit like Mr. Smith. The scoring system in speed golf adds strokes taken to the number of minutes consumed, a formula that places greater value on golf ability than on speed. It's far easier to lower your total score by saving a shot around the green than it is by running the course (typically five to eight miles) one minute faster. Zigzagging to chase errant shots, looking for lost balls and raking bunkers (a requirement) are big-time sinks. A good 10K runner with a scratch handicap will beat an Olympic-caliber 10K runner with a 10-handicap every time.

Players may carry any number of clubs, up to the normally allowed maximum of 14. Some competitors use only two, but Mr. Smith has settled on six: a driver, a four wood, a five iron, an eight iron, a 52-degree gap wedge and a putter. These he carries in a skinny Sunday bag with a stand but no strap. After each shot he keeps the club he hit with in his left hand, snatches up the bag with his right hand and dashes off like a rabbit.

According to my stopwatch, he spends from five to 10 seconds on each shot and completes par-four holes in about three minutes. The only time he walks is from the edge of the green, where he has to leave his bag, to his ball before putting. That's to help control his heart rate. "Putting is the hardest part because your body is jacked up and yet you have to make a smooth, delicate stroke," he said. Conversations with biathletes, who pause during long cross-country ski races to take shots at targets with rifles, taught him the best time to pull the trigger on a putt was after a long exhale, an instant before his lungs become so starved for oxygen that he has to breathe in.

I played five holes of speed golf at Pumpkin Ridge with Mr. Smith offering instruction as he jogged alongside and an entire round a few days later at another course in Oregon that was deserted because of steady drizzle and the late-afternoon hour. It was a lot more fun than I expected -- in fact, downright thrilling. The extra rush of oxygen in my lungs and the elevated heart rate supercharged my favorite pastime with a runner's high. The two hours and seven minutes of my 18-hole round (the best run-walk pace my middle-aged legs could muster) went by in a blur. My total absorption in the moment reminded me most of playing high-school football, when entire games seemed to fly by in 15 minutes.

I didn't score particularly well, but that was largely due to unfamiliarity with a tricky course and that jabby putting stroke, as Mr. Smith had predicted. Significantly, I didn't "miss" one shot all round -- no stubbed chips, no pulled hooks (my nemesis), no wild pushes. Shot after shot, I simply saw and fired. The round flowed. It was a worry-free experience.

"In speed golf the subconscious takes over," Mr. Smith said. "It knows how to do everything -- at least in an experienced golfer it does, because it's done it thousands of times." Problems arise when the conscious mind asserts itself, especially after a disastrous shot. "We hit bad shots because we're human. Even Tiger Woods hits terrible shots sometimes. But most players, instead of chalking that up to being human and trusting the mind-body system to do it better the next time, allow the conscious to step in and try to fix things, by telling us to take the club back this way or move the body that way. But the moment you start thinking consciously about how to do things, that destroys your ability to perform," he said.

Mr. Smith doesn't tout speed golf as the answer to all our problems (and he certainly doesn't expect that it will ever become widely popular). But he has learned a lot from his experiences (most compiled in his book, "I've Got 99 Swing Thoughts But 'Hit the Ball' Ain't One") that enhance his teaching and perspective on golf. For instance, he promotes games (he hates the word "drills") that involve the imagination much more than technique and repetition.

Many players, especially those bogged down by second thoughts and deliberation, will score better with faster pre-shot routines, he said. "Play a few rounds with no practice swings, or discipline yourself to take no more than 10 or 15 seconds from pulling the club to hitting. It will probably feel uncomfortable at first, because change is always uncomfortable. But it's worth trying to see what happens."

Above all, don't model your routine on those of the Tour pros. "Ben Hogan, Sam Snead and Byron Nelson, those guys played fast. You can see it in the old tapes. But then TV golf came along just as Jack Nicklaus was at his best, and he played unbelievably slow. So now we have everyone standing forever behind their ball visualizing and picking out intermediate targets and so forth, just like Jack did," he said. "The result is not just five-hour rounds, but people don't score as well as they should." Nor do they have as much fun.

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