



Every golfer is restricted by the limits of his physical skill. Big Berthas or not, most of us still can't drive a ball 300 yards, after all. The one thing within our control, however, is how we approach an overall round, a specific hole or a given shot. The most common fault committed by the average golfer has little to do with his physical abilities, but rather it involves thinking too little about what he wants to do with a particular shot. Adopting a tactical approach on the course can make an enormous difference to your scorecard. With that in mind, let's discuss three crucial principles of good course management.

3 Secrets to better course management and Lower Scores

By IJ. Schecter with Doug Weaver
Photos by Rob Tipton/Boomkin Golf

PLAY IT SAFE

While the Seve Ballesteroses of the world do occasionally make their mark, habitual risk takers do not last in professional golf. More often, it is those players who learn to strategically play toward the areas of least risk that rise to the upper echelon.

The high-percentage approach can seem unspectacular, but it often translates to victory. In 1994, Tom Lehman won the Memorial by playing high-percentage golf, constantly making low-risk areas his targets. Twice this resulted in eagles from the fairway on shots that landed on the fat part of the green, then rolled toward the hole and in. Lehman's performance provides evidence that the best way to put the ball in the hole is not always to aim directly for it.

On the flip side, let's consider the seemingly snake-bitten Greg Norman. While it's true Norman had his share

of remarkable bad luck, poor decision-making sometimes contributed to his misfortunes. Was Norman's epic collapse at the 1996 Masters a result exclusively of bad karma? No. Six strokes up on Nick Faldo at the start of the day, Norman lost his lead largely as a result of taking unnecessary chances on the 12th and 16th holes, on both occasions ending up in the water.

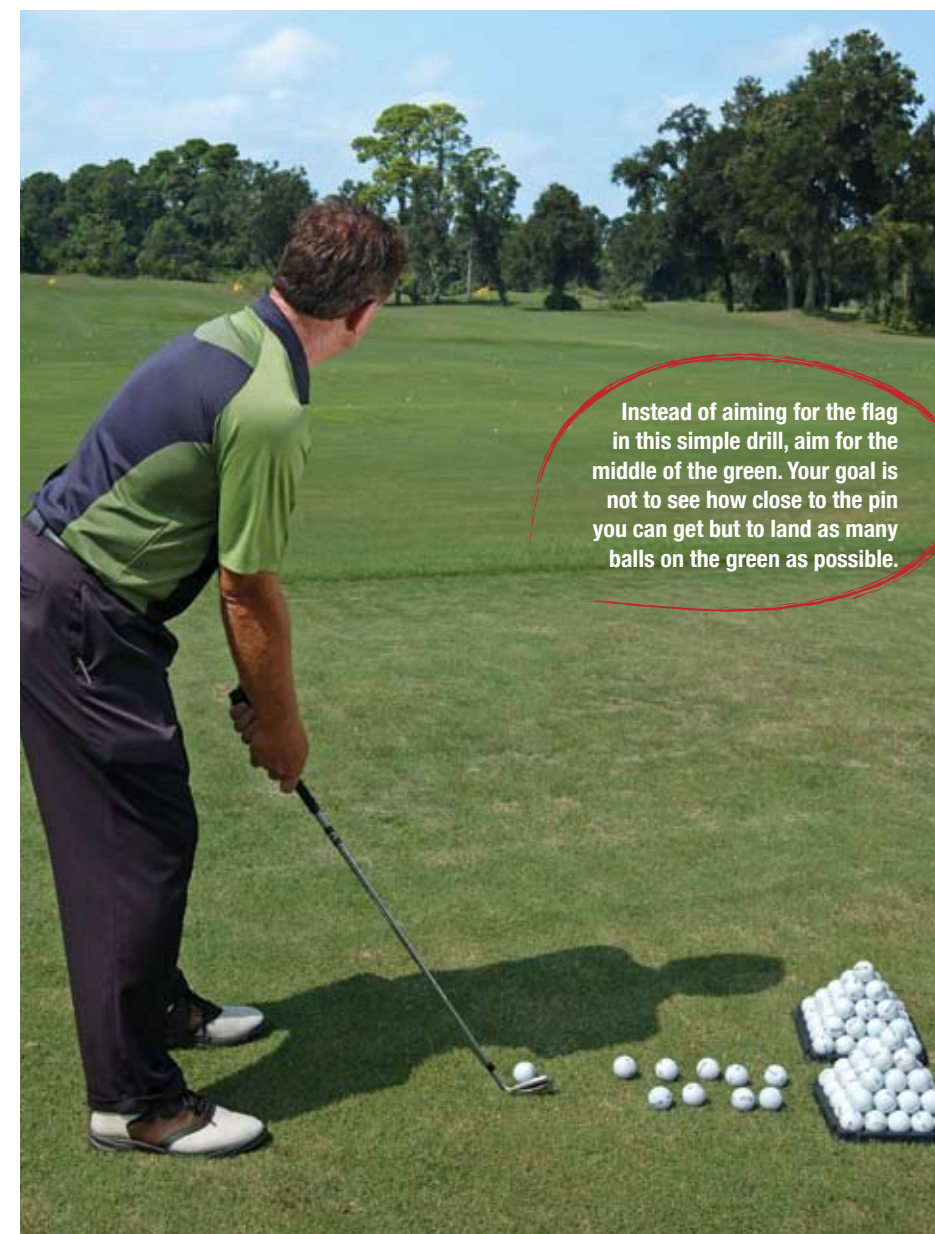
By contrast, Faldo played an unglamorous but intelligent round, consistently aiming for the fat part of the green, staying away from trouble and, ultimately, holding the trophy over his head.

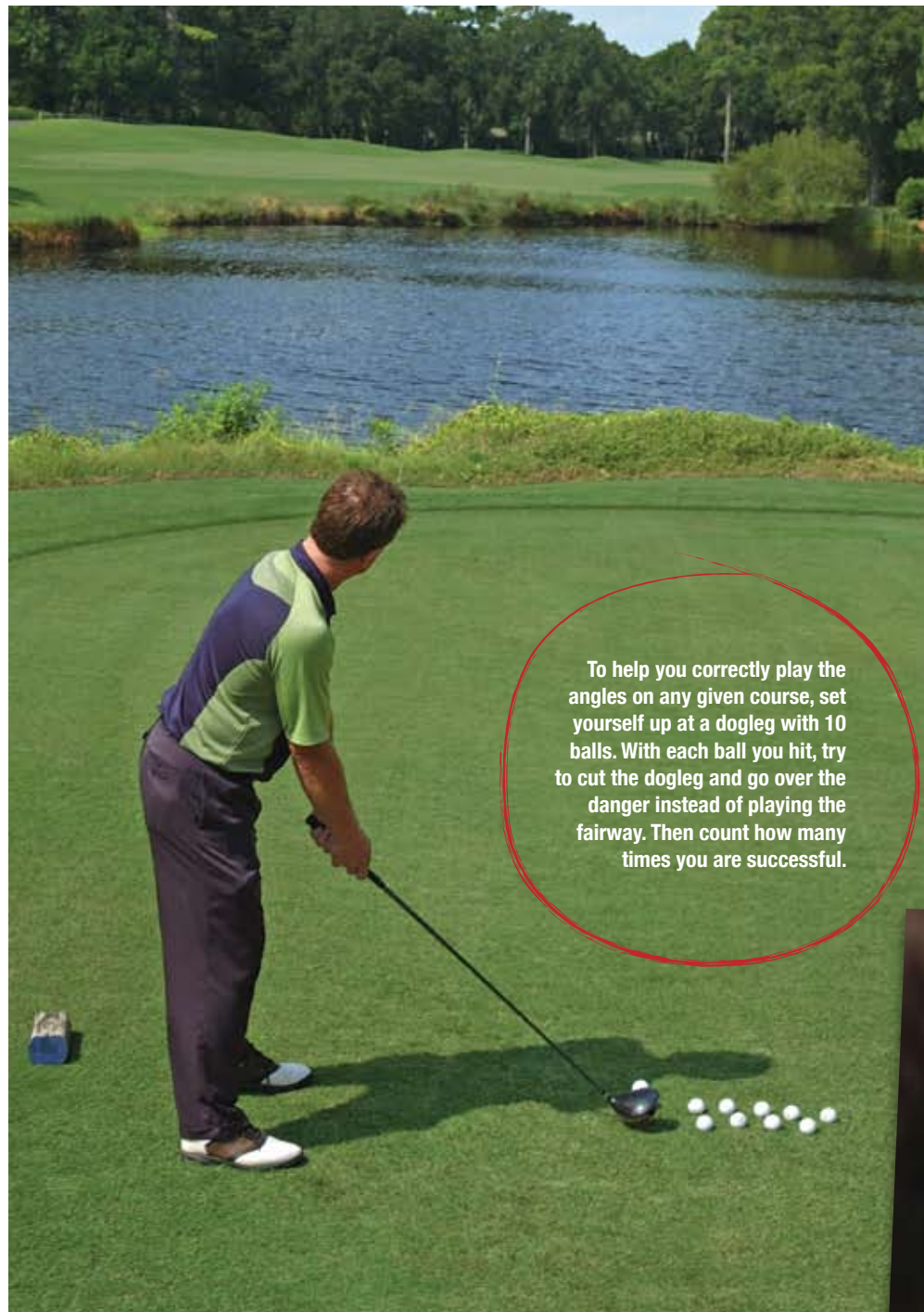
To help implement this approach, here's a simple drill. Take a pail of balls to a driving range, then pick a flag 100 yards away. Aim for the middle of the green with every ball, regardless of the position of the flag. Your goal is not to see how close to the pin you can get but

to land as many balls on the green as possible. By aiming for the green and not the hole, you will help embed the safe approach that pays dividends once you take your game out onto the course.

If you want to up the ante, create tangible rewards for hitting greens in regulation when you play the actual round. If chocolate-chip cookies are your biggest weakness, award yourself one for every green hit. Perhaps allow yourself to rent that new release after a round in which you hit 50 percent of the greens.

Another excellent drill is to play a round with a partner and every time you have an approach shot to the green, ask him to drive or walk ahead and remove the flag from the green. This will force you to aim for the green rather than the hole. Do this often enough, and you will find yourself eliminating strokes because you will have lodged the lesson into your subconscious, which will no longer insist you aim directly





To help you correctly play the angles on any given course, set yourself up at a dogleg with 10 balls. With each ball you hit, try to cut the dogleg and go over the danger instead of playing the fairway. Then count how many times you are successful.

for the pin. Get into the habit of trying to hit 18 greens — instead of trying to hole 18 approaches — and you will see your scores start to fall.

If you're worried that playing it safe will always produce average shots and never great ones, consider the 1989 U.S. Open at Oak Hill, where the sixth hole was aced not once but four times by four separate players in the same round. The hole had a T-shaped green with a steep ridge separating the front third of the green, which was, in turn, guarded by an elevated bunker to the right and a creek draped with heavy rough short and left. The only safe play was to try to land the ball past the well-protected pin and hope the slope would bring it back.

Each of the four players to hit aces on the sixth hole that day reported that they'd simply aimed for the safe part of the green. Instead, they ended up with a collective achievement with odds calculated at 1.89 quadrillion-to-1.

PLAY THE ANGLES

Playing the angles, another vital principle of good course management, means not only hitting solid shots but also placing yourself in position for subsequent shots. To help understand this concept, consider top billiards players who never attempt merely to sink a ball but rather set up their next shot at the same time. Great golfers never simply swing and see where the ball lands. They consider the entire hole strategically — the hole as a whole, one might say — and are thus always thinking a shot ahead.

Much has been made of Tiger Woods' strategy at the 2006 British Open at Royal Liverpool. Woods demonstrated that, even though this course can play extremely tough when trouble is courted, it can be tamed if its angles are played shrewdly.

Leaving his driver in the bag for the better part of four rounds, Tiger hit toward trouble but never into it. When he saw bunkers 240 yards away, he hit his ball 220, leaving his competitors to make constant attempts to bomb it over or around trouble and, as often as not, landing it in instead.

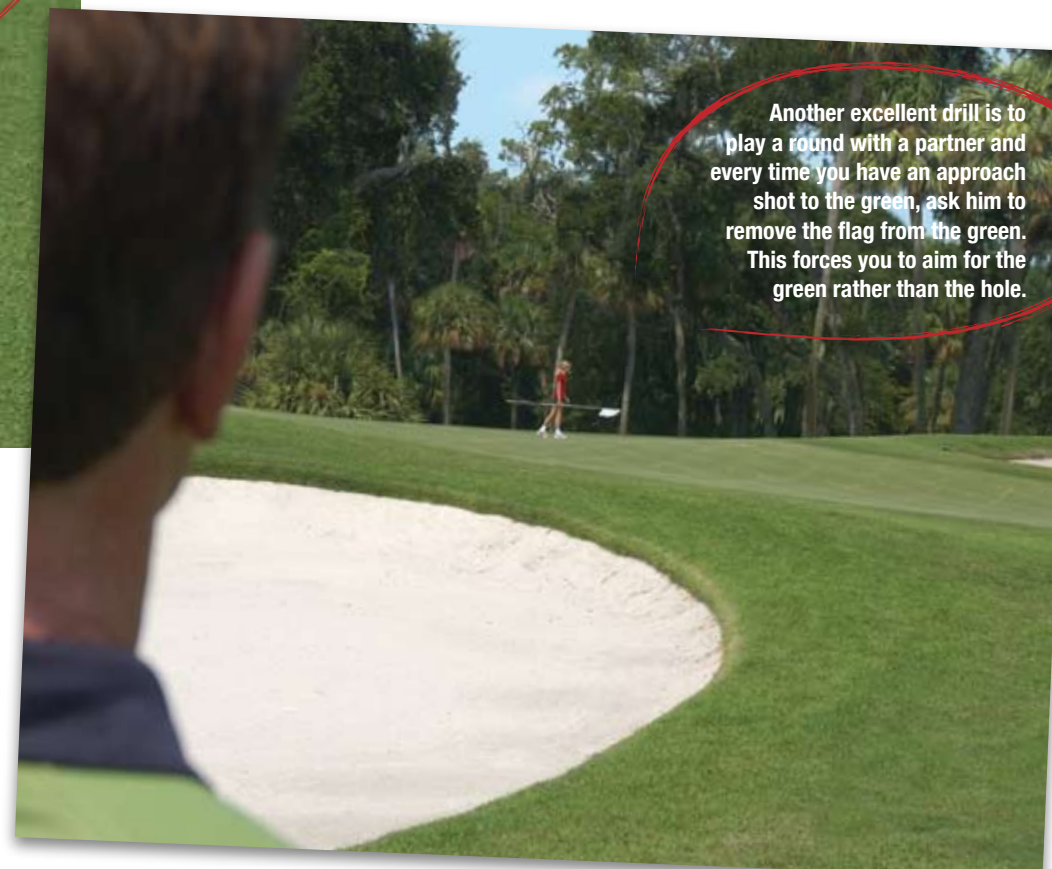
The man who played the angles, placing himself in good position for one shot after another, came away with an easy victory, while the rest of the field was left wondering why they'd had so little success.

To test this principle, set yourself up at a dogleg with 10 balls. If you have a fade, make it a dogleg away from you (a dogleg right for a right-handed player). If you have more of a draw, make it a dogleg coming across you (a dogleg left for a right-handed player).

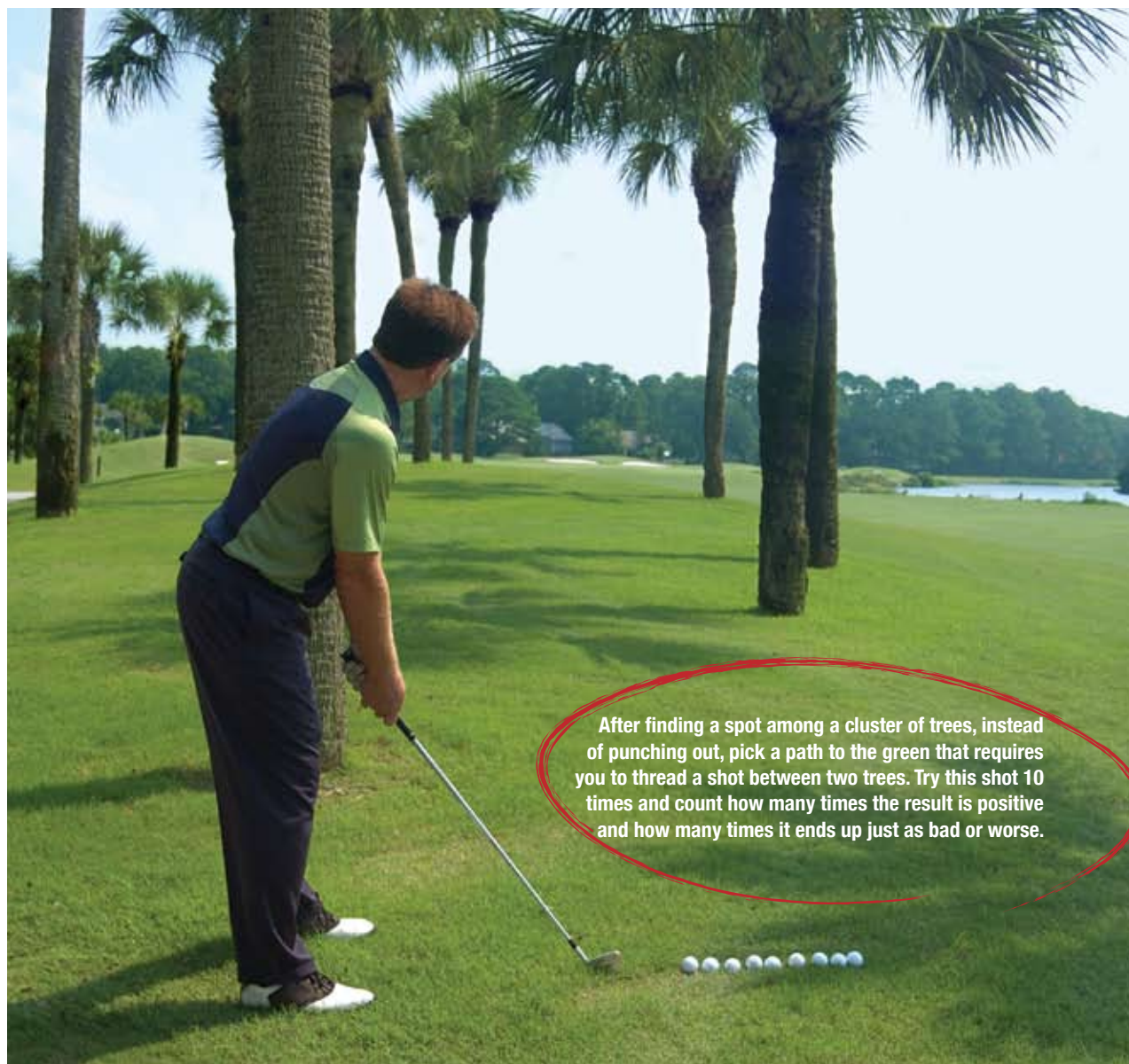
With each of the 10 balls, try to cut the dogleg, going over the danger instead of playing the fairway. Count how many times you're successful. Even when your ball manages not to land in the absolute worst spot possible, chances are you're still in poor position when it's time for your next shot.

Next, find a spot among a cluster of trees 100 to 150 yards from the green. Instead of punching out, pick a path to the green that requires you to thread a shot between two trees. Try the shot 10 times. Again, count how many times the result is positive and how many times it ends up just as bad or worse.

Both of these drills are designed to illustrate the same lesson — unless you have a repertoire rivaling Tiger's, playing a hole as it is laid out will almost always lead to better



Another excellent drill is to play a round with a partner and every time you have an approach shot to the green, ask him to remove the flag from the green. This forces you to aim for the green rather than the hole.



After finding a spot among a cluster of trees, instead of punching out, pick a path to the green that requires you to thread a shot between two trees. Try this shot 10 times and count how many times the result is positive and how many times it ends up just as bad or worse.

scoring. Even if your repertoire is broad, taking your medicine — and getting back onto the hole's prescribed path — is still most often the right choice.

Consider Payne Stewart at the 1999 U.S. Open at Pinehurst. Stewart came to the 72nd hole needing only a par to win the tournament over his closest competitor, Phil Mickelson, but ended up pushing his drive into the rough. Though he was only at mid-iron distance, Stewart knew he had little chance of stopping the ball on the green. Instead, he pitched out, laying up to 75 yards. With his third shot, he calmly stuck his approach to 15 feet, then sank a dramatic putt for the victory.

David Toms provided a similar example during his 2001 victory in the PGA Championship. Like Stewart, he came to the final hole needing a par and, like Stewart, hit into the rough off the tee, giving himself a tough stance and a tough lie. With a large lake facing him, Toms, with a 5-wood in his grasp, had a crowd cheering him to go for it. Instead, he calmly switched to an iron and laid up to the water. He then stuck his approach and sank the putt for victory.

PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

We all have parts of our game we call on with confidence, and other parts that prove somewhat less reliable. Making good decisions on the course can help you score better by putting yourself in position to maximize the strong parts of your game and minimize its weaker aspects.

A number of professional golfers have epitomized this philosophy over the years, from Corey Pavin, a comparatively small player who nonetheless had a successful career not by hitting long but by playing angles tactically, to Mike Weir, who similarly doesn't outdrive the bigger players but constantly puts himself into position to utilize his superior iron play and putting skill.

Let's say you use your driver off the tee on the first three holes of a round and slice with it each time. The next hole is a 380-yard par 4. When your driver stays straight, you hit it

220 yards on average. With your 3-wood, a much more consistent club, you hit it just under 200 on average. Here, the reckless decision is, of course, to stick with your driver, since it will make little difference to your second shot. The tactical player will keep his driver in the bag, use the 3-wood and put himself in great position for an approach. You need only ask Mickelson about the catastrophes that can result from teeing off with the big stick when it hasn't been working all day.

Let's consider another scenario. You're 10 yards off the green in shallow rough with no hazard blocking your way and another 15 yards to the pin. You're in prime position for a bump-and-run, which is among your most consistent shots. But yesterday you saw Tiger and a few other players execute flop shots with their wedges and are now dying to try one yourself.

Again, in such a situation, the strategic player will opt for the shot he knows he can execute with a reasonable rate of success instead of trying something risky just for the sake of experimentation.

Around the green, most amateur golfers would do well to remember the advice "get the ball rolling." In other words, the highest percentage shot is usually the one that gets the ball moving on the ground as early as possible. Play the pitch-and-run or bump-and-run and leave any flop shots to the pros, at least for now.

Jack Nicklaus provided a great example of playing to one's strengths, especially regarding the tournament he valued most. Nicklaus had a natural fade more than a draw, but when approaching the Masters, he knew that Augusta's layout requires a right-handed player to frequently draw the ball if he wants to score well. While playing in tournaments leading up to the Masters, such as the New Orleans Classic, Nicklaus would practice his draw because he wanted to be able to use it with confidence when it was time to tackle Augusta.

By honing this shot and making it a strong part of his arsenal at just the right time, Nicklaus put together what we might consider a fairly respectable Masters record over the years. While you may never reach Nicklaus' level, by playing it safe, playing the angles and playing to your strengths, you'll certainly improve your own game. ☞

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When you're in prime position for a bump-and-run, the best advice for the amateur golfer in this situation is to just get the ball rolling and leave the flop shots to the pros.