

## Coaching Corner

Roger Staples asked top New Zealand coach Jenny Clarke  
“What to do when my form declines?”

This can be a coach's dilemma and when it was raised on the Nottingham Board discussion forum earlier in 2014, Jenny Clarke offered some sage advice. At the time of this article (December 2014) Jenny was the current Women's AC World Champion, runner-up at the recent Women's GC Worlds and a top NZ coach. Here she shares her contribution with the Gazette.

**H**aving had a lot of experiences of patches of bad play, I think I can probably comment with some ideas of what might be useful.

Before we start, ask yourself the following questions, and think gently about the answers, for the most recent period when you experienced a bad patch:

- \* Did you have a precise aiming point?
- \* Had you stalked every ball from a few yards back?
- \* Did you see your mallet hit the ball?
- \* Did you follow through in the direction of your target?
- \* Did you play a bad shot, or series of shots, at some stage and then dwell on them as the game progressed?

Having had a bit of honest reflection, perhaps remembering some things you should be doing, is a good start. The next thing to think about is why things went wrong: crosswind, 'the yips', someone annoying you before the game, quality of the grass, something about your mallet – these are all distractions. Now is the time to put them aside, as it's not their fault! I also tend to reject helpful players who offer up excuses for me – blaming bad play on something random doesn't fix the problem. Asking yourself the aforementioned questions and going back to basics goes a long way towards making you functional, even during the worst bad spells. The basics are:

1. **Aim.** Go back about four yards and get in line with where you want to hit your ball. Preferably choose a blade of grass where you want to aim, or a spot just behind a target ball if you are aiming at a ball (or a blade of grass an inch through a hoop you want to run – I find if I aim at the middle of the jaws of a hoop it too often ends up there!). It's at four yards back where I get ready for a shot – and this includes gripping your mallet with your hands where they're going to be when you hit your ball. When your game is off and you're feeling frustrated, this is one of the first things to go.
2. **Stalk your ball.** Walk up to it in line with where you're aiming. Have your mallet ready to strike the ball, and focus on your ball and the point you're aiming at. Starting from so far back feels strange at first, but I find the main benefit is that I more often than not arrive with my feet at the right distance from the ball. Starting from way back also helps to line things up accurately. Since you have already taken aim and have your grip ready, you should be relaxed and concentrating on hitting the ball by the time you arrive at your final stance. If something is wrong, or your head is full of negative thoughts, it's no problem – acknowledge them, set them aside, and go back to step 1.
3. **Watch the mallet hit the ball.** When you swing, the most crucial point is to see your mallet hit the striker's ball. Whenever I play a rubbish shot, I try to ask myself, “Did you see your mallet hit the ball”. If your answer is “I think so” – it's probably a no! This is basically my cue, whereas others use “keep your shoulders still”, “keep your head still”, “keep your eyes over the ball”, “keep your head down” ... – if you watch your mallet hit the ball, most people find their body parts stay in the right place.
4. **Keep your body still when hitting the ball.** Of course, you have to move your arms, pivoting mostly at the shoulders. Also, you can have a bit of flexing at your knees, but beware that too much movement is something that can let you down big time, when you're feeling nervous (I speak from experience!). Rehearsing the stroke is good for getting both your balance and you're timing right. Are there any pro golfers who don't rehearse every stroke? One of the key errors likely to cause a bad stroke is rushing it. Make a controlled practice stroke part of your routine. I'd say avoid excessive body movement, but in a big roll stroke in particular, your body is going to need to be able to move quite a lot. By rehearsing the shot, you can try to make sure you are still going to be balanced as your centre of gravity moves.
5. **Follow through deliberately in the direction of your aim.** I told a beginner this last week – she was playing wafty little shots that dribbled left or right of her target. I asked her to follow through as though her mallet was the thing that had to hit her target. She responded with three consecutive centre ball contacts! Again, feeling 'off your game' can often result in more and more 'pokey' play,

where you prod at the striker's ball. Learn to follow through smoothly and in the direction of your aim. If someone were to photograph you at the finish of your swing, you'd hope that the mallet was reasonably high off the ground, and the shaft and head were pointing directly at your target.

So, when you're having a bad patch, think about these five points: aim from about four yards, stalk, see your mallet hit your ball, keep your body relatively still, follow through in the direction of aim. You might miss more than you want to, but you'll hit a lot more than you would otherwise!

Good luck! ~ **Jenny Clarke**

