

# 9 TIPS

WITH  
DEREK JAMES

**SHORT GAME GURU DEREK JAMES PROVIDES 9 VALUABLE TIPS FOR GOLFERS DURING A GAME WITH A SHORT-GAME SUFFERER AT SOUTHBROOM GOLF CLUB.**

**A** SOUTH COAST TRIP provided the opportunity to not only play the course voted “the most fun to play in South Africa,” but also do something about my “yippy” short game. I headed to picturesque Southbroom to take on club professional Derek James over nine holes.

James, recently named PGA Professional of the Year to go with many other accolades, has earned a reputation as South Africa’s guru of the short game, and he readily agreed to my suggestion that we incorporate 9 key lessons into our 9-hole match.

Derek was off-kilter at the start, finding one of Southbroom’s water hazards off the first tee to hand me the first hole, but immediately spotted errors in my pitching and putting technique that allowed the lessons to start.

“You’ve got to hit and hold,” he explained. “Put an image in your mind and hit through to a controlled, posed finish no matter what shot you’re playing. Think of a square position with the putter facing down the line or with a chipping or

pitching club in a nice follow-through. This programmes your mind to make a proper shot of it rather than snatching at the ball as I see so many golfers do.”

Short of the second green in two, with a shot in hand, I elected to put my wedge away and putt through the fringe rather than risk messing up the obvious little pitch. Derek picked up from my practice swings why I had backed out. “You have to hit down on the ball. It must be a descending blow. Get the ball back in your stance and take a divot. You were trying to make the sole of your club glide along the turf, hence the fear of ‘toothing’ it, rather than trusting the bounce and loft.

“The absolute key is to hit down, down, down! Get into the habit of practising using only your right hand; you’ll quickly learn to feel the locked position and gain the speed you won’t get from your left hand. On all short shots you’ve got to give it a bit of zip and that comes from the right hand. Work at it, get the ball back (in

your stance) and you won’t catch it thin.

“I’m a great believer in activating your right side,” said Derek, remarking on the third tee that he had spotted the key error in my method and that we would soon start working on it. In terms of the match I joined the many golfers who have driven out of bounds to the right on the third, Southbroom’s tricky stroke one. We were all square.

At Southbroom’s signature par-3 fourth hole, with its ocean-side tee, I was preoccupied with taking photos and too immersed in the beautiful view. I hit a horrid shot, and at the short par-4 fifth a poor 60-metre pitch was followed by three putts. Suddenly I was two down with four to play, unassailable as it would prove when you’re up against the home pro.

Having for too many years been assailed by poor pitching, I had been hoping Derek would provide me with a silver bullet, and he had spotted what I was doing wrong as early as my pitch to the first green.

BY DAN RETIEF



Derek James, photographed on the fourth tee at Southbroom Golf Club in April, 2014.

“You’re far too inside going back,” he emphasised. “With the short game the club never goes inside (the line) on the way back, it must be outside. The natural stance is slightly open (left foot drawn back). You need to work on seeing a line drawn through your toes

and then keep the clubhead working on a parallel line. It must feel as though it’s a little cut shot.”

I had been getting inside the line, probably as a result of nerves, and often I would stub the heel of the club and flub the shot, or impart

hook spin. At first, taking the club outside felt awkward, but I immediately saw how much easier it was to get the grooves on the ball and a more consistent loop.

Derek went to Durban High School and cut his golfing teeth at Royal Durban.

In 1982 he had the unique distinction of winning Springbok colours and representing South Africa, with elder brother Neil, in the Eisenhower Trophy in Switzerland. Having known Derek since he joined the Sunshine Tour in 1984 there

was much to chat about. He has coached overseas and built a dedicated following of foreign and local students who travel from far and wide for a “tune-up.” Along with wife Sheena and children Courtney and Connor, he has been at Southbroom for 18 years. We reminisced about the old days and Sunshine Tour characters.

Our match was forgotten as Derek warmed to his favourite subject of getting the ball up and down. A visit to a bunker caused him to reveal that a good many of his pupils approach him for help getting out of sand.

“The biggest mistake comes from players who have been told to stay still over the ball, or keep their legs still,” he said. “They end up not transferring their weight. Start with your weight predominantly on your left side. There is some movement as you make the backswing, but finish with your weight even more on the left side as you hit firmly through the sand. A good drill is to hit shots by driving your right hand through the sand to get the

feel. If you flick at it the club will become stuck, so you’ll soon get a feel for the right position. Don’t be scared. Make a proper pass at it, end with all your weight forward, and hold that finish!”

Mark McNulty, one of the great exponents of the elusive art of turning three shots into two, has spent time with Derek dissecting the intricacies of the scoring area of the game, and leading tour players such as Hennie Otto, Keith Horne, Andre Cruse and Andrew Curlewis have made the trip to Southbroom to learn how to save strokes. Derek confides that the one “trick” that invariably sets pros aside from amateurs is how they prepare or set up.

“Ball position is crucial and your practice swing will give you a good idea where the ball should be placed. On a downslope for instance your practice swings must mimic the shot you intend to play. Hit down, scuff the grass, and you’ll see that the clubhead hits the ground sooner than you think. The position is way back – sometimes crazy back – well outside the right

foot,” he says as he sends chips towards the hole that nip at the grass.

An eight-time winner on the Winter Tour, Derek says his best win was taking the Canadian TPC in 1994. His biggest cheque, and arguably best performance, was the one that got away, when he finished second in the championship that launched Ernie Els’ career – the 1992 SA Open at Houghton.

With the match completed, 3/1, Derek reminds me that just getting the technique right will not produce a lasting remedy. The magical cure, as we’re often reminded, is practice. I discovered that my method was too cramped, that I have to get the club outside the line, and must hit down when chipping and pitching. He leaves me with some drills.

One is getting the right hand activated by practising one-handed; the other is rugby-passing a ball. He is also a believer in standing sideways and tossing a ball underhand to targets on greens. “It is amazing what this will do for your feel,”



**‘YOUR WEIGHT MUST BE FIRMLY ON THE LEFT SIDE WHEN PLAYING BUNKER SHOTS.’**

### HOW TO TURN THREE SHOTS INTO TWO DEREK JAMES’ 9 KEY TIPS

**1 Hit through the ball and hold your follow through.** Pose for the camera. Encourages rhythm and balance.

**2 Hit down.** It must be a descending blow. Take a divot or scuff the grass hard. Feel the texture of the grass. Practise hitting the ground. Is it hard, soft, thick, matted, sandy? There must be purpose to your practice swing. In your preparation feel the bounce of the club hitting the ground. Down, down, down!

**3 Practise shots with only the right hand.** You need to inject speed and that will come from the right hand. You must give it “zip.”

**4 The club never ever goes inside the line on the way back,** it must be outside. Feel like you’re trying to cut across the ball.

**5 In bunkers start with your weight predominantly on your left side.** There is some movement as you make the backswing, but finish with your weight even more on the left side. Hit firmly through the sand and be conscious of the speed coming

from the right hand. Practise holding the club in the right hand and cutting through the sand to get the feel.

**6 Get width into your swing.** Think of passing a rugby ball. You can’t pass it without a backswing, and on your through-swing your right arm will naturally extend towards the target.

**7 Ball position is vital** and the drill of hitting down, scuffing the ground as you make practice swings, will give you a feel for where the ball should be. The ball position is almost always further back in the stance than most people think. On a downhill lie it could be outside the right foot.

**8** The last thing before you hit the ball after having gone through your routine is to **decide on the spot you want to land the ball**, which will give a feel for the type of shot you want to play. Forget about the target and think where you want the ball to land.

**9 Finally, practice, practice, practice!** Have sessions hitting right-handed shots; throw balls underhand to various spots; land the ball on a specific spot (a towel or head cover); and include sessions where you work on the strike, getting perfect contact on the face without worrying where the ball is going.

he says, while conceding there are intangibles. “Some people just have more of a touch than others, but you’d be surprised what practice can do.”

As we head back to the pro shop, a friendly spot where folk linger to chat, and where Sheena, who has caddied for her husband in more than 50 tournaments, is holding fort, Derek exhorts me to include two other exercises in my practice sessions.

“Once you’re comfortable with the basic technique, spend time pitching the ball

to different spots you’ve marked on the green to learn to take the target out of your mind and rather concentrate on where you want the ball to land. Also have sessions when you concentrate solely on your strike. Just work on hitting the ball sweetly in the middle of the club – and this applies to putting and long shots too – without worrying where it’s going. Get the feel for the strike and I guarantee your misses will be much better.”

I liked that. Good misses I can live with. ♣

