

Winter Time to Think About Golf

by Timothy J. Carroll
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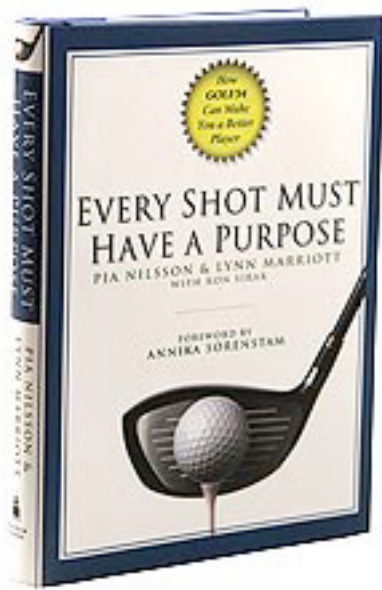
Golfers are a hopeful lot. They head out to the course knowing that the whole experience is likely to include more frustration than fairways, and yet they go again and again, confident that their real game is much better than the one they are actually playing. All they need, they tell themselves, is a better technique and, perhaps, a better frame of mind. Golf-instruction books naturally trade on this insane optimism. Golfers snap them up and scurry from bookstore to driving range with noses deep in the pages to begin divining secrets that have so long eluded them.

Tiger's New Swing seems to promise a secret shared. But the big name in the title, the person who's also pictured taking a big swing on the front cover, has absolutely no connection with the book – as a disclaimer tucked away on the back cover confesses. The big name, of course, belongs to Tiger Woods, who won two of golf's four major tournaments this year after a 10-major winless "slump" and now appears poised, as he turns 30 next week, to mount an assault on Jack Nicklaus's record of 18 professional major wins in a career. (Mr. Woods has won 10.)

The "new" in John Andrisani's title refers to the adjustments Tiger made in the past couple of years, hoping to correct the "stuck" position in his downswing that had come to plague his game. In Mr. Andrisani's description, the key components of the new swing, learned under the guidance of teacher Hank Haney, are an open stance and a new out-and-up backswing that allows for a fuller stroke and a more controlled fade – i.e. the "left-to-right power fade" that is easier to hit consistently than a right-to-left draw. Mr. Andrisani praises Mr. Woods's new swing as the "chief reason why Tiger's control off the tee has reached such a high level."

In fact, though, these swing secrets are very close to banal and hardly revealing. And it isn't clear that Mr. Woods's control is really at such a high level. He finished 188th in driving accuracy this year on the PGA Tour, hitting under 55% of the fairways. Even the two majors he won, his fourth Masters and his second British Open Championship at St. Andrews, came at courses that are so wide open their fairways are nearly impossible to miss.

The four, count 'em four, drills in the final chapter of Tiger's New Swing are reprints of drills from his coaches through the years – in effect, Tiger's old swings. But the book's first page is even more telling. It is there that Mr. Andrisani praises Pablo Picasso for his willingness to take chances, adding: "I feel the same way about Tiger Woods as I do about Picasso, because Tiger has painted shot-making pictures for all to marvel at on golf course canvasses around the world." Any golf book that reaches for such a comparison is bound to be more bunker than fairway.



Every Shot Must Have a Purpose For golfers looking to get the ball in the hole faster and to have more fun, a better choice in reading this off-season is Every Shot Must Have a Purpose by Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott. Both Ms. Nilsson and Ms. Marriott have been named to various best-instructor lists, and for good reason

Ms. Nilsson helped to bring golf to Sweden – a neat trick, given the weather – and has coached Annika Sorenstam, the best female player ever. With typical outside-the-box brashness, Ms. Nilsson once wondered why par on a typical golf course is 72, assuming two putts on each of 18 greens. Why not just one putt, she asked purposefully, making par 54? Ms. Sorenstam was clearly paying attention. She got close to this new par a few years back, being the only woman to shoot in the 50s on the LPGA Tour.

Every Shot argues that golfers should stop overthinking, concentrating on every part of a "perfect swing" and start just playing golf. The authors aim to build trust in basic swing techniques and also to bring an enjoyable calm to the mental and emotional aspects of the game, so that playing becomes playful again.

One way of achieving any golf goal is to practice better. Ms. Nilsson and Ms. Marriott note that a lot of golfers waste their time on the driving range, hitting the same (not very useful) shot over and over. They describe a 54-shot practice regimen that includes changing clubs routinely (as on a golf course), trying for

low shots and high, for draws and fades and performing strange tasks, such as hitting balls off a single leg with the club turned around the wrong way and eyes firmly shut, the better to learn balance. This idea is to challenge the golfer, and ultimately the person, to see what is possible and what is not.

Every Shot it is true, has some of the mysticism we associate with The Legend of Bagger Vance or with Shivas Irons, novelist Michael Murphy's shaman-golfer. The book talks of changing beliefs to change reality and embracing fears and drowning them in kindness. "Imagine the impossible," the authors propose, "and then try to figure out how to make it happen."

Like Picasso, these aren't normal subjects for a golf book. But unlike Tiger's New Swing, Every Shot Must Have a Purpose offers words of advice that may give even the shakiest golfer true reasons to be hopeful again.