

Plan Your Pitch

By Trent Wearer
Meridian Golf Learning Center

A pitch shot up to a flag whose green isn't guarded by a pond or a bunker is one thing but when you have a pitch shot over some obstacle, the shot takes on a new meaning. The shot takes on a penal aspect to it that can easily tense up even the best players. We'll get into technique second but first let's talk about the strategy of the shot.

Strategy

Typically, club of choice would be a sand wedge or lob wedge. The trajectory will depend on the amount of green there is between you and the flag. In the first photo you can see quite a bit of green between the bunker's edge and the flagstick. For this type of shot, even a low pitch that lands over the bunker and rolls to the hole is sufficient. In the second photo we see a flagstick that is positioned much closer to the bunker's edge. This shot will need a more lofted trajectory so that it lands softly. This would be a great plan as long as the lie of your ball is acceptable. A ball that is sitting down in the grass may not allow for a high trajectory causing you



Photo #1 Quite a bit of green between the bunker and flagstick



Photo #2

Very little green to work with.

to reevaluate where you need to hit the pitch – it may be away from the flag. It is better to leave yourself a putt from ten, fifteen, or even twenty feet versus pitching it into the bunker. Choosing a landing spot and placing a picture in your mind of how the ball will fly through the air and land on that spot can be just what you need to pull the shot off. In photo #2, the best plan may be for the ball to barely clear the bunker, bounce a few times, and then roll several feet before it drops in the hole or ends up close. While this is a wonderful plan, we must remember that your landing spot should be generous enough so that if you land the ball a little short of it or past it, you won't be in trouble. Know that it is beneficial to let the ball roll past the hole some as you will get a free read on how the ball rolls on the putting surface in preparation for your come-back putt.

Setup

Set up for a pitch with a relatively narrow stance. The ball will be positioned within your feet depending on how high you would like to hit it. Start with the ball in the middle, see what kind of trajectory you get, and then alter it by moving it forward or back to get the desired height for the shot at hand. Your shoulders should be parallel to the target. For a standard pitch you should position your weight equal among both feet. To hit the ball lower you may position more weight toward the front foot. In order to hit it higher you may set a little more weight toward your back foot.

Swing

The backswing and follow through should be of equal length which will encourage better distance control. As well as trajectory, distance control is a vital aspect to becoming a great pitcher of the ball. How far back and through you go will depend on the distance of the shot at hand. Your wrists should hinge on the back swing (Photo #3) and then your body will turn open to initiate the downswing to the point where, at your finish,

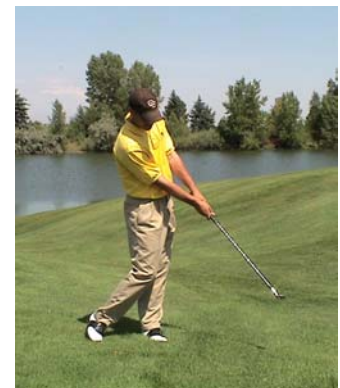


your belt buckle and sternum are facing the target while your weight has shifted completely off of the back foot (Photo #4). It's important to note that the club will still be striking the ball on a descending approach producing a small divot after the ball.

Pitch shots from different distances, from different slopes, from good lies and poor lies, to a target of varying circumstances will be common. Because of this, one cannot have just one swing. To become versatile enough and comfortable in all of these circumstances, you need to practice.

Practice

To become adept at pitching you need to gain feel for distance, develop a plan for where it will land, how much it will roll, and at what trajectory. Start by hitting short pitches. Your finish will look similar to Photo #5. Notice how the shaft is still inline with the left arm. This golfer did not attempt to scoop the ball into the air. Doing so will cause chunked and skulled shots. Once you're comfortable with the short one, progress to hitting longer pitches as you will need to become proficient from many distances. Hit several balls ten yards, then twenty yards, then thirty, and so on.



Also spend some time hitting it low and high. Learn what works best for you. Move the ball position around, change your weight distribution, create more or less loft on the club face through impact or a combination of them.

Pitching is one of the most important parts of the game that is all too often overlooked and under practiced. It is a mini swing that encourages positive motions for your full swing. A pitch shot can save the day so don't neglect spending time pitching the ball around your backyard or at the local course.