PLAY HOT THIS WINTER

Five adjustments that will see your scores plummet with the mercury

IMAGES BOB ATKINS



Soggy fairways, clumpy rough, slow greens, heavy sand, windy approaches. Yes indeed, golf courses are different places between October and April, and ask different questions of us all. But with just a few simple changes, you can adapt your game to meet the challenges of off-season golf. In this article we'll take a look at five situations where a simple tweak to your approach can yield big rewards. They will also give you more options when the better weather returns. We begin on the tee, with an easy way to stop those wet and heavy fairways costing you distance...

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YOUR COACH

DARREN PARRIS
North Foreland, Kent.
A PGA Professional for more than 20 years, Darren played in the 2006 Open Championship
northforelandproshop.co.uk

1. TEE SHOT: INCREASE CARRY, INCREASE YARDAGE

Let's start with a fairly obvious winter change – firing some more height into your tee shots to boost carry distance on soggy, wet fairways. It's important you don't try to overdo this; as we increase launch angle, it becomes increasingly hard to deliver a solid strike and good energy transfer into the ball. So limit your adjustments to the set-up only, and make your regular swing.



1. Give it some air

Traditionally, we'd advise a tee height where half the ball is above the crown of the driver. But for some extra height, tee the ball a cm or two higher. This will work with the other set-up changes we will make to encourage a slightly more upward attack angle, quicker launch and increased height.



2. Increase leanaway

Stand upright, gloved hand only on the club. Slide your trail hand down your trail thigh until you feel your trail shoulder drop. This will tilt your spine back while keeping your shoulders square, putting your upper body in the ideal position to deliver a more upward sweep through the ball.

3. Put it all together

The final step is to make sure the ball is a little further forward in your stance, right up off the lead instep or even the big toe. Check you have:

- Ball teed higher.
- Spine more leant away.
- Ball forward in the stance.

Trust these three set-up changes to create the extra launch and height you are looking for, and simply make your regular swing from this new platform. Even a small rise in launch can gain you big distance in wet conditions.

2. APPROACH: HONE YOUR SQUEEZED HYBRID

Away from the tee, winter conditions create different challenges. While winter rules give us preferred lies on the cut grass, missed fairways tend to mean nestled lies in wet, clingy rough. With cold, damp conditions meaning courses play longer, the hybrid becomes a chief weapon through its ability to slide though rough while giving launch and distance. For best results, don't sweep the ball like you would with the driver: squeeze it like an iron. Use these two visualisations:



1. Strike the second ball

Play the ball centrally in your stance... but picture a second ball, opposite your lead toe cap. As you attack the ball, imagine that you catch that second, forward ball post-impact. This intention will help you squeeze down into the strike, helping cleaner contact when the ball is nestled.

2. Hit it under the bar

For an alternative picture, visualise a crossbar two feet or so off the ground, a few feet in front of you. How would you deliver the club to drive the ball under that bar? Take that question into the shot and you will instinctively deliver the descending blow that squeezes the ball out and up. With weight low in its head, the hybrid is still more than capable of getting the ball to soar, even from a downward blow.

3. PUTTING: FOCUS ON STRIKE QUALITY

Winter means longer, wetter grass on the putting greens as rain and lack of growth affect mowing regimens. Of course this slows the surfaces up, asking us to increase stroke length to get the ball back to the hole. The huge danger here is a drop-off in strike quality, which means poor energy transfer and putts coming up short. Here are four things you can do to find the sweetspot on a regular basis.



1. Change your putter weight

There are conflicting theories on putter weight on slower greens. Some – including Tiger Woods – feel more mass works better in creating easier stroke momentum and roll; others prefer a lighter feel because they find it easier to make a longer stroke. As ever, it comes down to personal preference and some targeted experimenting. However you see it, play around with putter weight to see how it affects your slow-green performance; there are plenty of putters on the market with interchangeable weights... or you can even keep specialist summer and winter putters.



2. Train a centred strike

Deaden the heel and toe portions of the face and you create for yourself a smaller, more central area for the strike. I'm using two dabs of Blu Tack here, but you can also wrap elastic bands round the toe and heel zones. Start short – perhaps 4 or 5-footers – focusing on finding that sweet, centre zone at impact. As this becomes easier, increase the putt and stroke length. All the time, you're increasing your ability to strike putts solidly – such a vital element of slow-green performance.





3. Stroke length: Go one-third, two-thirds

Generally on slick summer greens, we are looking for a pendulum rhythm and pretty even backswing/throughswing lengths. But as the greens slow up, it's no bad idea to add a little more pop to the stroke. Work on this by placing two tees 18 inches or so apart and positioning the ball inside and between them, two-thirds towards the back one. Now use the pegs to regulate and train backswing and throughswing lengths. You'll quickly develop a feel for the different rhythm and acceleration of this stroke, and how it helps send the ball that bit further.





4. Smooth roll: Train an even-handed approach

As the stroke gets longer, it's all too easy to see the ball bouncing and bobbling off the blade… compromising both line and length. This is ultimately a problem with attack angle:

1. Hitting down: A delofted face drives the ball down into the ground. This is typically the result of a dominant lead hand, dragging the handle forwards through the strike.

2. Hitting up: An overlofted face sends the ball into the air… or tops the ball into the ground. Usually this is caused by an overactive and flicky trail hand.

If either of these tendencies sounds familiar to you, spend some time working with the opposite hand:

- Handle draggers, hit putts with the trail hand only. It'll help you learn to release the putterhead and deliver a smoother roll.
- Trail-hand flickers, hit putts with lead hand only. This will increase its influence and ability to keep that busy trail hand under control.

4. GREENSIDE SAND: GO SQUARER, GO STEEPER

As sand gets wetter it of course gets heavier, offering more resistance to the clubhead. This mandates a change of technique, one where we swap summer's shallow, splashy strike for a more driven, punchy attack. Adopt this plan when the sand goes dark:

Go halves

In dry, fluffy summer sand we are looking to use the curved sole of the sand wedge – the bounce – to resist digging in and stalling the club. That means a bounce-enhancing open clubface and a wide, shallow base to the arc of the swing. But in winter, the firmness of the wet sand gives us the opposite problems:

- We need a steeper attack to get the club to cut into the harder surface.
- Because the sand is so heavy, we need to strike it closer to the ball.

So begin by halving your summer sand contact point and also the openness of the clubface... perhaps from 20º open to 10º. This promotes the optimal strike in these conditions.

Set-up and swing: Stay lead sided

As with driver, use your address position to program the ideal motion and strike:



1. Play the ball just forward of centre in your stance. A little further back than a summer position, this takes some of that summer shallowness out of the strike. Place 60-65% of your weight into your lead side.



2. Maintain that lead-sided feel as you swing to the top. This holds the low point of the swing stable, a little holeside of the ball, and helps you create that slightly steeper attack angle into the ball.



3. Play this more as a punchy drive than a summer splash; keep those wrists firm and avoid 'throwing' the clubhead past the hands. Swing with intent, hit your contact point and the ball will pop up and out.

5. PITCHING: KEEP THE BALL UNDER THE WIND

For the most part we can get away with high, floating pitch shots in the summer. In fact they can suit the generally calm and firm conditions. But in a gusty, wet winter, it's a different story. Here, we need to flight the ball lower to stop high winds affecting both line and length... and to help it release back to the pin on soft greens. To play this shot, focus on the beginning... and the end.



Set-up: Club up to keep it down

So much work for the knockdown pitch is done before the club moves.

- Start with your clubbing. A straighter-faced club like a 9-iron can make a lot of sense, the extra firepower lowering the flight naturally but also encouraging a shorter swing and a more controlled, lower-spinning contact.
- Play the ball just back of centre and place 55-60% of your weight into your lead side. This helps deloft the face and encourages a lower, driven flight.



Finish: 'Cover' the ball

Those set-up changes will do most of the work for you... but for the swing itself, focus on your finish position.



High: Armsy flick

The quickest way to send the ball up into the air is to hit with our hands and arms. When we do this the weight stays back, chest and hip rotation is minimal and the hands and wrists release freely through the ball, and into the finish. This all adds loft to the clubface, and height to the shot.



Low: Chest rotation

To beat that summery, high flick, reverse those moves. Keep hands and arms more passive and instead set the pace and aggression of the strike through a committed chest rotation. Besides assisting with weight shift and getting you solidly into your lead side, this helps you stay down through the shot and keep loft off the clubface. That all adds up to a lower, more penetrating flight that is so much more effective in winter conditions.