1

The Grip
After Alex Mercer collected the Elkington brothers at the train station, often as not he would take them to practice and play at New South Wales Golf Club. The course occupies a dramatic plateau in a national park in south Sydney overlooking rockbound Botany Bay, where Captain James Cook landed when he discovered Australia in 1770. Another Englishman, golf architect Alister Mackenzie, came to this exact spot 150 years later; Mackenzie, who would gain renown for designing Cypress Point, Augusta National, and Royal Melbourne, also laid out the holes at New South Wales Golf Club.

“You always hear about Mackenzie’s other courses, but in my opinion this is the best golf course in the world,” Elkington says. “This is golf in the kingdom. Just watch.” He walks up the wide fifth fairway, which becomes so steep that all that is visible for a few moments is the grass in front and the sky above. We reach the crest of the hill, and stop, and suddenly a stunning vista of rolling ground and waves crashing on rocks reveals itself.


“Steve was about thirteen when he came to me,” recalls Mercer. “Yes, you could see even then that he wanted to be great. I’ve seen heaps of people who’d like to be the best, but if you show them how much hard work is involved, it doesn’t take them long to drop. Hard work never daunted Steve.... Eight hours on a train. How keen can you get? Then he and Rob would get back on the train on Sunday afternoon and make it to school on Monday.

“His swing was not the same as it is now. He was very lanky, and like all young teenagers built like that he was a little flippy-wristed at the top of the backswing. He had a little more lateral slide, and his swing was upright, too upright. But he already had a little flair about him, and a real determination to make a score at the end of a hole. He just looked at that golf course, and at the other players, and thought, Well, whatever they can do, I can do the same or better.
Bonnie Dune Golf Club, Sydney, about 1978. The coltish Elkington shows good extension as he rips one off the first tee in a state tournament.

“I’ve been researching the game since the days of Harry Vardon, and I’ve discovered that the basics have remained the same since the days of hickory shafts: grip, posture, balance, alignment, and feel.

“Unless you’re absolutely sure of these basic parts of your technique, you won’t be able to let your rhythm and timing take over.”
I CAN TAKE a guy off the street, put a club in his hand, and in five minutes make him set up to the ball like me. Like someone you wouldn't want to bet.

That’s because the three most important things in golf require little movement and no talent whatsoever. They are grip, stance, and posture. Learning them correctly requires some discipline and practice, but they don’t take from your supply of talent.

I’ve always thought of a person’s native talent as a glass, filled with ability in liquid form. I’m fascinated that these three key components of the swing can be learned without spilling or drinking a drop. But the further you get from a fundamentally sound grip, stance, and posture, the more you’ll have to drain from the glass. Obviously, you’d be better off saving that talent for hitting the ball.

I admit to being almost obsessed with the grip. Soon after I took up golf, I used to walk the three miles to school with a twelve-inch piece of a club, just a grip on a cut-off shaft. And I’d pull that grip out of my backpack just to practice holding on to it. Alex Mercer had given me an intriguing thought: that I could have the best grip of anyone in the world, better even than Jack Nicklaus’s.

In time, hands powerfully but thoughtfully formed on a club began to appeal to me on both an artistic and a professional level. I have a bronze of Harry Vardon’s grip (the 1995 Vardon Trophy) in a glass case behind my desk, and I look at it often. It’s a wonderful reminder of where it all started.

I remember watching Ben Crenshaw give a clinic in Austin, Texas, in which he never got past how you put your hands on a club. Two hours, and that’s all he talked about. He got so into it he forgot to hit any balls. Probably most of the people there were absolutely aghast, not believing that they were listening to all this about only one part of the golf game. But I thought it was the most interesting talk I’d ever heard about golf technique.

The best grippers—Crenshaw, Nick Faldo, Jack Burke, and my coach, Alex Mercer, for example—give the impression that the club is a toothpick in their hands. People tell me that the club looks very small in my hands, too. That doesn’t necessarily relate to the size of the hands; in fact, I have relatively short fingers, and wear only a medium-large-size glove. No, the illusion of a tiny stick in giant mitts given by a good grip is a result of the hands dominating the club.

When Ben Crenshaw isn’t playing well, all he talks about is his grip. I’m the same way. I’ve never played poorly when my grip felt great.

The grip connects to every part of the game. For example: Everyone remarks that I never dawdle or waste time over a shot. Alex Mercer’s
explanation for this is that because I hold the club so well, I don’t have any conflicting thoughts in my mind. When no confusion clouds your thoughts, when you’re absolutely comfortable holding the club, you can play with ease. What’s at work here is centering, a concept from Zen philosophy. The centered person is at peace. Just as a child may be uneasy without his favorite toy, or a violinist may feel anxious until he holds his instrument, I don’t feel calmness and capability flow into me until I pick up one of my clubs.

My grip, in other words, is a key to my swing. I'll talk more about this in the chapter on the swing and swing tempo. For now I'll just say that the further you are from a correct, comfortable grip, the further you are from being a good or a better golfer.

FROM THIS POINT ON, remember that all the things you read here are equally important. The linking of the fundamentals is the key.

I do not profess that the basics of golf are easy. In fact, some are quite difficult. But the great thing about golf is that you get out of it what you put into it.

Please note: All the instruction in this book assumes the reader is right-handed.
THE FOREFINGER

Before you even pick up the club, consider the forefinger (also known as the first finger or the index finger).

Be prepared to essentially glue this digit to the sides of its next-door neighbor, the thumb. Do this on both hands. When I was a kid and just learning the game, Alex Mercer had me walk around for a week with my thumbs never leaving the sides of the forefingers. I’d even pick coins out of my pockets with my thumbs and forefingers fused together. This fusion helps my hands encircle the club so completely that you cannot stick your finger into any part of my grip and pry open my fingers. If I had to have an operation to help my golf, I’d have the doctor sew my forefingers to my thumbs.

I emphasize this connection for two reasons. First, by not allowing any holes or gaps in your grip—no leakages, as I like to put it—your grip will not slip. Second, it gives your hands a feeling of wholeness, or togetherness, so the hands never feel as if they’re at cross-purposes.
THE LEFT HAND

It is not difficult to get the left hand on the grip in the proper way. Let’s start by surveying a small part of the hand’s anatomy. Hold your left hand up, palm toward you, then fold your fingers in slightly. Notice the several deep wrinkles in that palm. The deepest and topmost line is called the *distal palmar crease* (distal means farthest from the center). The club lies above that wrinkle, along the base of the fingers. The left-hand grip is not in the palm, but not entirely in the fingers; but if you were to err, it should be on the side of the fingers.
Now, with the thumb connected to the forefinger, close the left hand around the handle. The thumb falls wherever it may, most likely on the center of the grip.

Its exact location will be determined by the size and conformation of the hand. Keep the thumb on top of the club as much as possible, and make sure the line formed by the thumb and forefinger is pointed at the right shoulder.

Strong or weak? I can hear you ask, and How many knuckles should I be able to see? In most golf instruction there is a lot of emphasis on whether the left hand should be turned to the right, so its back is facing the sky (a “strong”
grip), or turned to the left, toward the target (a “weak” grip). I don’t get into that, because if you’ve done both the two simple steps in left-hand gripping I’ve talked about, your grip will be neither too strong nor too weak.

Put it this way: You should be able to look down as you address the ball and see two knuckles of the left hand. That’s very orthodox instruction, and I agree with it. The two knuckle grip is neither strong nor weak, but neutral.

A final point about the left hand: The heel of your hand should never overlap the end of the club. In other words, the butt of the club should be entirely underneath the pad of the hand, so the entire hand is flush on the handle. Allowing part of your hand to hang off the grip will diminish your power, and your control of the club.
Most instructors have it that for the right-handed player the left hand is the more important, but I disagree strongly. The right hand is twice as important as the left, and ten times trickier to get on the club correctly. More important because the right hand dictates the right-arm position and how the club will set at the top of the backswing, where everything can go completely wrong—or exactly right. Trickier because a golf club is thinner than anything else we hold to hit a ball; it’s much thinner than a tennis racket, for instance, or a cricket or baseball bat. For most people, a correct right-hand grip definitely feels unnatural.

But the right hand, wrist, and arm are crucial in golf. I believe it’s no coincidence that virtually all the amputee golf champions are right-armed, not left-armed.

Think fingertips for your right-hand grip. If a drink with a straw was on the table in front of you, you’d instinctively draw the straw to your lips with your fingertips. Painters and calligraphers naturally hold their brushes in the fingertips, so they have freedom and flow in their wrists. But another instinct too often causes golfers to grip a golf club too much in the palm, presumably because a golf club is a heavier, less delicate object than a straw or a brush. But a golf club needs to be held more sensitively and precisely than does a baseball bat.
Again, begin by holding up your right hand, palm side facing you. You’ll notice the two deep grooves that separate the three sections of each of the fingers. These are called the *inter-phalangeal creases*, and they provide a map for the placement of the club in the right hand. The club lies right in the center of the approximately one-inch-wide center section of the fingers. The tips of the fingers—distal pads is the anatomical term—curl around to hold the club.

The pinkie finger fits on top of the forefinger of the left hand, with absolutely no pressure or grab. The important gripping fingers are at the bottom of your right hand, the thumb and forefinger. I believe you should practice occasionally with the pinkie finger off the club.

The top of the left thumb should be secured against the lifeline of the right palm.

The right thumb’s contact with the club is tiny, but surpassingly important. Alex Mercer used to take a marker and draw a little spot on the right side of the pad of my right thumb. That spot is the right thumb’s only point of contact with the grip.
Just as with the left-hand grip, the line formed by the thumb and forefinger should point to the right shoulder. This union at the bottom of your grip forms what I call the saddle.

A properly formed saddle is the only way to make the club face stay square on its journey throughout the swing. (See photo, below.)

As for the length of my grip—how much of the club is covered by my hands—I think all the fingers should have their place on the grip. The hands should neither be mashed together nor spread out, but comfortable and secure, dominating the club.
SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON
THE GRIP

Like most serious golfers, I prefer the Vardon grip, in which the little finger of the right hand overlaps on top of the index finger of the left hand.

A few good players—Jack Nicklaus among them—use the interlocking grip (though Jack hardly interlocks at all). In this method, the little finger of the right hand goes inside that same space in the left-hand fingers and forms a pincer with the left index finger. Some people with small hands feel this gives them a little extra holding power.

But beware of interlocking too tightly. That’s where power isn’t. A tight grip is usually too deep into the palm of the right hand, not in the fingers, where it belongs.

A third method, the ten-finger or baseball grip, adds more wrist to your swing, and that’s fine. But if that’s the grip that’s most comfortable to you, you have to understand its effect on your swing. You’ll become a hands player and inevitably a less smooth swinger than you will if you use a Vardon grip. And less smoothness inevitably means less consistent striking. Art Wall, the 1959 Masters champion, used the ten-finger grip. He may have been the exception that proves the rule.

A lot is made of grip pressure, but I believe that if you hold the club correctly this part of the grip equation will take care of itself. Undoubtedly, there’s a lot of excessive grip pressure in the land, but this is nearly always the result of an instinctive feeling that the club could slip because of a faulty grip.

“Oh hell, the club slipped,” someone will say after a bad shot in a pressure situation. I remember Claude Harmon’s reply to this time-worn excuse: “Did the club slip—or was it your heart?” In other words, a lack of confidence in your grip can and does cause nervous swings.

How tightly should you hold the club? Tight. Perhaps “very secure” is a better description. I don’t think you can grip the club too hard if you grip it correctly. Not that I have a death grip on it, but I have the feeling that three guys couldn’t pull the club out of my hands. Everything is clamped down and sealed off. And I have the pressure in the right spots.

Possibly the foregoing will tempt you to change your grip. Well, if it needs to be done, have no fear, just do it. Often you’ll hear teachers say, “Well, this change will make you play lousy for two months, and then you’ll start to play better.” I’ve never believed in that. I’ve always felt that if you make a change that really needs to be made, then you will improve immediately.
The Grip
FOR THE ADVANCED PLAYER

As you know, there are two types of grips, round and ribbed. Ribbed grips, which I use, have an oval cross section, with a thickened line through the bottom of the grip at six o’clock. With ribbed grips, I feel I have a reference point for soling the club squarely each time, and a distinct spot for my hands, which I don’t get with round grips.

My specifications: Victory Cord grips, size 60, ribbed, with one spiral wrap of three-quarter-inch tape underneath. Size 58 is a standard industry size for men; size 60 is a little smaller, and 62 is smaller still, for women, children, or men with small hands. (Diameter is, of course, also affected by the use of tape beneath the grip.)

The correct grip size is as important as the right shoe size. But a proper fit is not only a matter of how big your hands are. Most club fitters will merely measure your hands and select a grip for you, but an equally important consideration is how you hold the club. If you hold the club as I’ve recommended—primarily in the fingers—you may well need a thinner grip. Fat grips tend to make you hold the club in your palms.

In the summer, when sweat can make a club a bit harder to hold on to, I use grips with more cord. In the winter, I go to a soft rubber grip. I go thinner when I play in England late in the year, because a smaller grip helps the feel. I also consider a thinner grip when hot weather makes the hands puff up.

Each of my grips must weigh 50 grams. Few club makers bother to check this, even though grips from the same box can vary by as much as 8 grams. This could make the swing weight—the ratio of the head weight to the grip end—vary by a full point, even two. A golf club is supposed to be a balanced instrument, so why not have a balanced set of grips?

Although many people think it’s just decoration, the pattern embossed on the grip I use has an important practical use. It’s called a grip guide. It provides a road map for the placement of the thumbs and shows how far down the club your grip should extend. I never fail to use it.

All Victory Grips feature this design.
A GRIPPING TALE

When I traveled to Scotland in 1979 to represent Australia in the Junior World Cup, I went into a butcher shop in St. Andrews to buy some sausages; our team was staying in a dormitory at the university, and we cooked our own meals. The butcher asked me what I was in town for besides sausages, and when I told him he reached behind him for a golf club. “Let’s see your grip, lad,” he said. I’ll never forget that moment: There I was in the home of golf, and a stranger in a bloody apron wants to talk with me about the golf grip. So I held the club for him, and he said he was going to look in the bookmakers’ shop for my name and the odds on me and my team. By my grip alone, he was game to put a wager on me. Then I asked the butcher to show me his grip. He had huge hands, but he put them on the club as delicately and precisely as a surgeon. When he told me he was a quite competent player—a seven handicap on the Old Course, and a five on the New—it didn’t surprise me at all.

In some golf cultures—the United States in particular—it’s common for someone to ask you to take your club to the top of the backswing and hold it. But in Australia and in Scotland, the focus is on the grip, anything to do with the grip, including how big your grips are and what they are made of.