

Golfweek

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For your game

Right brain meets left brain

By melding both approaches, Arizona State senior Niklas Lemke has become one of college golf's elite players

By Evan Rothman

At first blush, Tim Suzor and Niklas Lemke seem a mismatched pair.

Suzor, director of instruction at the Kinetic Golf Academy in Scottsdale, Ariz., has a distinctly scientific bent. His method, employing the work of Michael Bentley and his Bentley Mechanics approach, relies strongly on cutting-edge technology such as the 3D-motion-analyzing, biofeedback-providing K-Vest. He speaks confidently about "optimal musculature length" and "anatomically neutral positions," "motor programs" and "movement patterns." In academic parlance, he's a quant guy.

Arizona State senior Lemke, a native Swede majoring in interdisciplinary studies, is a qualitative type. In golf-speak, a feel player.

Still, something clearly clicked when Lemke and Suzor started working together last fall. Lemke has won two 2006-07 events and heads to the NCAA Championships this month as a favorite.

"I used to hate structured practice, but in talking to my national coach back home, we agreed that some parts of my game needed it," Lemke says. "That was hard in the beginning. I'm a feel player, but feelings change from day to day, and I'm not sure you can rely on them for your golf swing."

For his part, Suzor hopes his charge will become even more structure-oriented.

"This is a process with a lot of training and repetition – it's not, 'I've got the feeling and now I'm going to just go hit it,'" Suzor says. "I try to keep Niklas on a leash, but he's a feel guy and will go off and tinker. He's getting away from that a bit now that things like the K-Vest can give him information quantitatively, and he's got more answers. But it takes time."

Instruction series

Our twice-monthly instruction articles focus on players who have made significant moves in the Golfweek/Sagarin Performance Index. Learn what they and their coaches are doing to improve, and how they work on certain areas of their games.

If it seems that player and coach are philosophically incompatible, quite the contrary. Despite the whiz-bang technology, training aids (or as Suzor says, "power tools" that are "the kind of things you'd see at a physical therapist's office"), laser-fit orthotics and the like, in this instance, "structured" isn't tantamount to "technical."

"The work with Tim is actually the least technical thing I've ever done, which is what I like about it," says Lemke, the son of a teaching pro. "You never think about positions – it's all so grounded, natural and basic. About the only things we work on are setup and balance. I don't have to worry about where my clubface is at the top when I'm not playing well; maybe I just think about my balance. It's so easy to fix on-course if you have to."

Thanks to their work, such competitive struggles have become a rarity for Lemke, whose long-term goal – "playing against the world's best players here in the States and being the best player in the world" – is starting to seem like anything but a pipedream.

The player: Niklas Lemke

Age: 23

Ranking: No. 2 Golfweek/Sagarin College Rankings

Height/weight: 6-foot-2, 185 pounds

Gear: Titleist 905S driver (10.5 degree), Nike Ignite T60 3- and 5-wood (15 and 19 degree), Titleist 695MB irons (3-9), Titleist

Vokey Design wedges (48, 54, 60 degree), Titleist by Scotty Cameron 009 putter, Titleist Pro V1x ball

Best results: Medalist, 2006 Illini Invitational and 2007 National Invitational

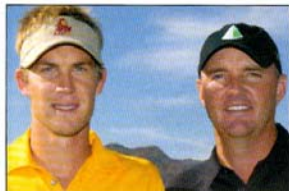
The coach: Tim Suzor

Age: 37

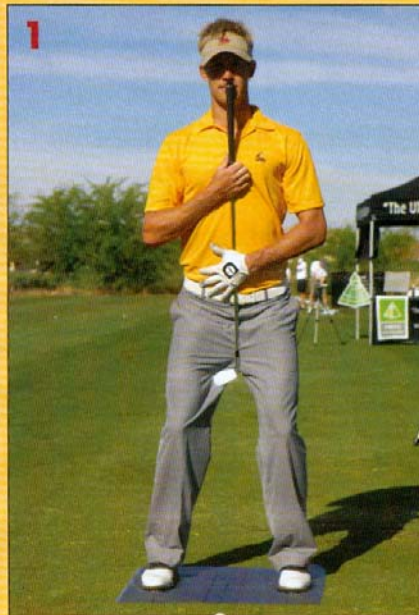
Title: Director of instruction, Kinetic Golf Academy

Credentials: Founder, Camelback Golf Academy, Scottsdale, Ariz.; Bentley Mechanics – certified instructor and educator; certified by Titleist's TPI and the Faldo

Golf Institute; taught former 1991 U.S. Women's Amateur champion Amy Fruhwirth; works with ASU's Azahara Munoz and Anna Nordqvist, both ranked in the top 15 of Golfweek's college rankings.



Aligned for success



Not just posturing

"The posture stick is the drill I use the most," says Lemke, who employs it before warm-up and after competitive rounds in addition to practice sessions (pictured across top). "I never have to think about whether my posture and setup are good, or if I'm the right distance from the ball."

Per Suzor, the drill puts players in the strongest, most neutral position anatomically. In it, the player holds a club so that it touches the chin, sternum and belt buckle (1), then flexes the knees to put weight on the balls of the feet and tilts from the pelvis (2). He then drops the right hand to just above the right knee (3). Setting up to the ball this way, the club's shaft and the spine will tilt to the desired angle (4).

"Your body is on stretch (upon completion)," Suzor says. "Golf suddenly looks like any other sport – baseball, football, it doesn't matter. From there, you can get into the dynamic motion of the golf swing."

As a result of this drill, as well as the use of the aforementioned K-Vest, Lemke has rid himself of a rounding between his shoulder blades at address that led him to roll the club inside – and then overcompensate and take it away outside.

"With better posture, it's much easier for me to take it away on plane," Lemke says.



Lemke with a K-Vest



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Balance keeps Lemke grounded

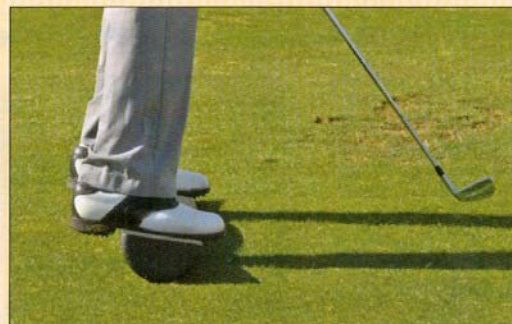
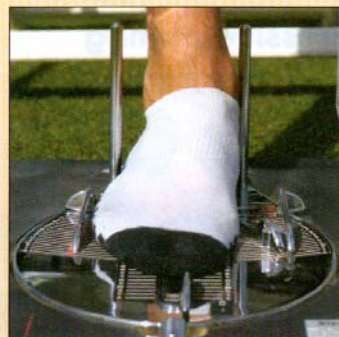
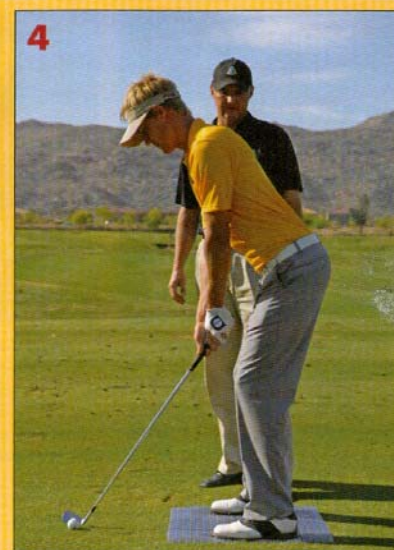
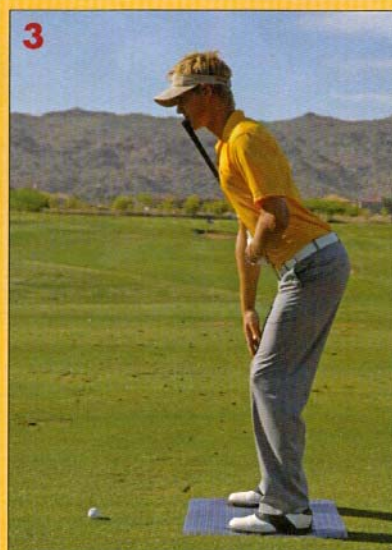
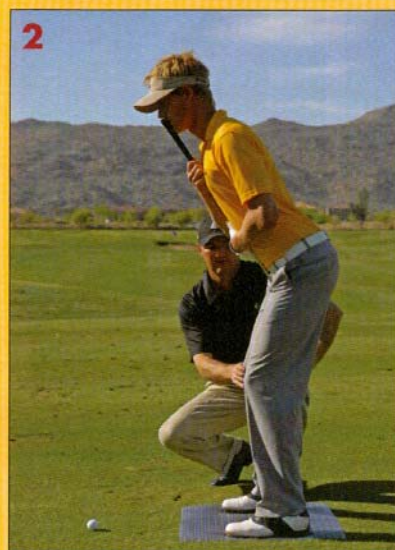
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Golfweek.com For video of Niklas Lemke's drills and game-improvement tips from Tim Suzor, visit Golfweek.com.

More instruction: Select instruction and equipment articles from previous For Your Game sections also are available at Golfweek.com.



At left, Lemke's ankle touches the metal bar of the Aline fitting device, showing that his weight isn't centered over his foot. With an orthotic (right) his ankle - and his weight - is centered between the bars and over his foot.

Feet don't fail him now

"The bulk of golf instruction is taught from the hands down and swing plane position," Suzor says. "When you work from the ground up, you can affect ball flight and get to the root causes much quicker. You don't have to get much above the feet and hips to help the swing."

Like many top players, and at Suzor's urging after biofeedback analysis, Lemke has worked to improve hip flexibility. ASU trainers often help Lemke perform rotation stretches. Suzor believes tight hips often cause players to flare their feet, which throws weight to the heels.

More unusual was the attention spent correcting Lemke's feet. Suzor fit Lemke for Aline sports orthotic inserts (first adopted by top downhill skiers and skateboarders), whose laser-based system aligns the knee over the second toe for, well, let's call it "biomechanical correctness."

"It sounds kind of funny, but really good athletes usually have good structure to their feet, which stabilize the knees and hips," Suzor says. "Power starts from the ground - you push against the ground, and the ground pushes back. Without this ground reaction force, you wouldn't have any power at all, so your feet need to be attached to the ground properly."

"I played hockey for a long time, so I knew I had bad feet," Lemke says. "But I didn't think they would have as much of an impact on the golf swing as Tim explained to me they had."

Unstable behavior

Between the orthotics and work on a slightly slippery base platform, Lemke's feet have become more stable. Suzor's next step has been to stabilize his student's hips.

"Niklas' concepts were way off - he thought you were supposed to spin your hips as fast as you can, which is a huge illusion," Suzor says. "He was really rotational with his hips, and he couldn't get his upper body to stabilize over his lower body."

Suzor turned to a foam roller for help with Lemke's backswing over-rotation, in which the player's weight was on his left heel at the top of his swing.

"When he makes a backswing - what we call a counter movement - and stabilizes on the roller, the golf club goes up the shaft plane every time," Suzor says. "It's hard to swing it off plane. We have him get into that (backswing) position, hold it for 10 seconds, then hit a golf ball, and then repeat. The key to motor learning is repetition."

"It's a great tool," Lemke says. "On an unbalanced surface, you can only take the club back with your core - you can't use your hands. My hips and shoulders don't turn as much, and I can only swing to the position where I'm strongest." >>>

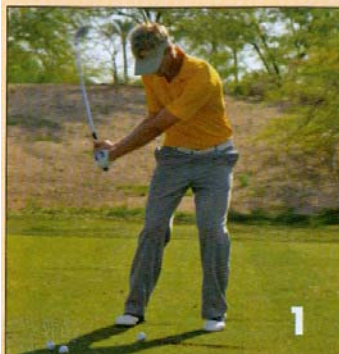


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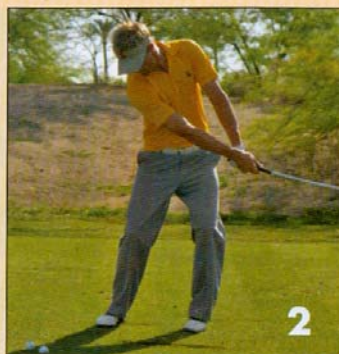
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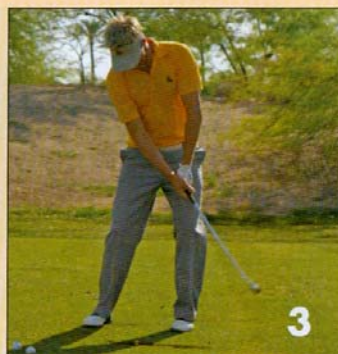
Stabilize with drawback drill



"One of Nik's favorite drills is the drawback," Suzor says. "You simply take the club back, hit the ball, and then pull the club back in the opposite direction. The body is saying that I need to do two things: No. 1, stabilize, or I'll hurt myself, and two, use my core to rotate the club back. Doing the drill makes him feel stable at impact, by which I mean, back to posture."

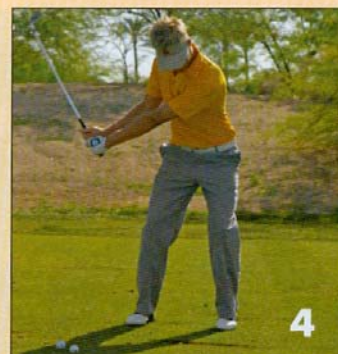


Lemke claims to hit the ball better using this recoil method than with a normal swing. (If true, it's still a bit too funky to try in competition.) Suzor attributes this to its controlling the player's tendency for "right lateral bending" on the downswing: When Lemke's left side turns too fast, his right shoulder tilts down in an attempt to stay behind the ball, causing the club to drop



underneath the swing plane. This means that, absent perfect timing with the hands, Lemke either releases the club and hooks the ball or holds onto it and hits a push.

"When he maintains his posture better, he can also control a higher trajectory," Suzor says. "He can hold a 4-iron approach, which he had trouble with before."



The pair has started to employ the same drill for chipping, too.

"Everything's a transfer of energy through the kinetic chain," Suzor says. "I like to teach the short game first, and work from small to big. But Nik convinced me that if he can hit a few more fairways and greens with his long game, he can go low with his short game."

7-iron flops enhance short-game feel

Although he generally splits practice time evenly between the long and short game, over the past few months Lemke has focused more on the former.

"The short game has always come naturally to me," Lemke says. "I worked on it a lot as a kid, just moving around hitting different shots - I've never practiced anything too specific."

The player has an unusual method for regaining dormant feel: He'll hit flop shots and bunker explosions with straight-faced clubs, such as a 7-iron, eventually moving all the way down to a 4-iron.

"It forces you to be more creative," Lemke says.

The degree of difficulty on these shots is impressive, but they are strictly for practice. Indeed, Lemke feels he must spend more time working on rudimentary chips as he strives to reach the next level.

"Because I fool around a lot around the greens, I'm really good at hard shots," he says.

"I tend to practice shots I don't get around the course, and I need to work on real-life, tournament shots. It's just that hitting tougher shots is more fun than normal, boring chip shots, because you have to put more effort into them."



Aggressive putting

Lemke has worked with ASU faculty member Debbie Crews on his putting. Lemke sometimes lifts out of his posture and, as a result, misses short and right.

"When I putt well, I'm a little more aggressive - sometimes too aggressive, but that's how I like to putt, especially shorter ones," Lemke says. "I tend to come up and out of it when I'm being less aggressive."

In addition to monitoring his mindset, Lemke also focuses on the speed he wants to see the ball enter the hole. From a technical standpoint, he focuses on the axiom of keeping his head down longer, practicing by stroking putts either with the left hand only (pictured) or simply with more grip pressure in the left hand.

