



Don't stick your neck out

Former Davis Cup player Jamie Morgan found that he needed to take care of an old tennis injury before he could maximise his potential as a golfer.

You might assume it's an easy transition for a professional athlete to take up golf. Most have excellent hand-eye coordination and a deep-rooted competitive spirit. But many must overcome crippling injuries that curtailed their playing careers. Tennis player Jamie Morgan is a case in point after sustaining a broad range of injuries, particularly to his neck.

Having represented Australia in the Davis Cup, Jamie, 36, is committed to playing golf at the highest level that he's capable. He plays at The Lakes in Sydney where he maintains a handicap of 2. In addition, he's made a successful crossover into business and manages a surf and ski shop (STM Snow Surf Skate) in the suburb of Bondi Junction.

Playing tennis from an early age, Jamie

made a lot of sacrifices to his youth and to his health in order to play elite sport. Last year, he underwent surgery to his neck that required a titanium disc to be inserted through his throat. It was the choice of the titanium disc or a fusion of his neck, which would have restricted his movement completely. He's also had six operations on his knees. Plus, he's had chronic back injuries as a result of excessive tennis and pushing his body to the limit.

So a lot of his former training practices are coming back to haunt him. For instance, Jamie used to do heaps of squats and would use his neck to counterbalance the 'dead' overhead weight. He thinks that was one of the causes of his neck injury. The neck was in that horrible squat position in which it was hyper-extended.

Jamie had all of that enthusiasm for training

and went down the wrong pathway for years. But that's the reason why I find him to be special – his intensity towards training. Even though he's in his mid-30s and suffered injuries that would stop a lot of people, Jamie's prepared to continually improve and search for answers. I hate to say it, but I've found that a fair percentage of elite golfers don't understand how to train like an athlete. And, they tend to lack commitment to a set regime. In contrast, Jamie and aspiring professional golfer Scott Draper both display a strong work ethic.

I would argue that an elite tennis player would work harder on physical conditioning than most professional golfers. Although top golfers may hit 500 balls a day, I think there's a lot more intention to what the tennis player is trying to achieve in a training session. There's

a sense of urgency because the career of a tennis player is shorter than a pro golfer. Fred Funk, 51, won on the US PGA Tour this year, but you would rarely see a 30-year-old win on the international tennis circuit.

The risk of neck injuries for golfers

Sydney-based teaching professional Gary Barter recommended to Jamie that he should visit me for treatment. Gary was concerned about Jamie's neck condition and didn't wish to progress any further until he had consulted a physiotherapist. Although Jamie had several other injuries, we agreed that his neck was the main priority. As Jamie says, "I don't want to give up golf when I'm 50 because of my neck."

Like many people, Jamie didn't know the difference between good and bad posture. We did a postural and skeletal screening and showed him the abnormal posture of his neck in a standing position, a sitting position and a golf position. We also checked his golf swing with a three-dimensional analysis to emphasise the force that was going through his neck at impact. It matched up with Gary's diagnosis that Jamie had compensatory neck movements in his swing. It became obvious to Jamie that his neck was 'poking' forward and it was having an adverse affect on his golf.

It's very important that you have a strong, flexible neck to play golf. If you think about it, your head is the weight of a bowling ball and it sits on your cervical spine, which is about four times the width of a golf tee. Whether you're swinging a tennis racquet, heading a soccer ball or packing into a rugby scrum, there will be a lot of force going through that neck region at impact. And it's the same with golf.

At impact in the golf swing, the vertical forces going through the spine are eight times your body weight. There is a lot of flexion through the neck because you're trying to stabilise the head during a forceful, torsional movement. If your body is caught behind or thrust too far forward, it's likely that even greater force will be put through your neck. And, you're repeating that motion again and again.

Fatigue is also a risk factor with neck injuries. At the end of a long working day, it's very hard to keep your head upright if you've been sitting behind a computer or standing on your feet for eight hours. And, towards the end of a round of golf, the repetition of swinging a club will add to the pressure through the discs in your neck and

the joints of your spine. The muscles are tired and unable to fully support your neck. So you don't have stability – it's almost bone on bone!

An integrated training approach

We gave Jamie six neck-alignment drills to reposition his head back over his shoulders. He uses them as a warm-up before every round of golf that he plays. Our trainer, Trent Malcolm, gave him some additional exercises as part of a conditioning program to strengthen his neck at the gym. All these drills were intended to alleviate the stress on his neck and correct his posture. In just six weeks, Jamie noticed remarkable improvement in his posture and wellbeing.

Being an athlete, Jamie loves systems and the whole interaction between a golf

team, comprising a teaching professional, physiotherapist, conditioner and biomechanist. I found it interesting that he sees a massive advance in our co-ordinated approach when compared to the way he trained for tennis in the 1980s and '90s.

Fortunately, there's an abundance of information that's available to golfers, which enables the game to be at the leading edge of sports science, coaching and technology. With commitment and a greater understanding of his body, Jamie should be able to achieve his goals and play more golf, better golf and lead a balanced life.

For a neck injury prevention or rehabilitation program, e-mail Ramsay McMaster at golfphysio@ozemail.com.au or phone him on 0407 432 282.



To strengthen your neck muscles for golf, physiotherapist Ramsay McMaster recommends several drills that can be included as part of a pre-round warm-up routine. His "posture circuit breakers" are universally beneficial to golfers, who are constantly leaning over the ball in fixed, abnormal positions, especially while chipping and putting. In the pictures here and opposite, 2-marker Jamie Morgan demonstrates some of his warm-up drills.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN LING



Next month:
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