



Beach training for golfers

Sand may hold fears for many golfers, but from a fitness perspective it's an ideal surface on which to train.

Walking backwards on sand acts as a counterbalance to the flexed posture of the golf stance.



The greatest revelation I've discovered to benefit golfers of all levels has been the use of beach and tidal work to strengthen a person's body. It was a little more than a year ago that I started trialling golf-specific training on the beach. I had a knee injury myself and was advised by leading knee surgeon and keen golfer John Bartlett to avoid surgery and consider rehabilitation.

As a physiotherapist, I thought I could improve my knee with a strength and conditioning program based around the non-weight bearing features of sand and water. Even though I always used to run on sand, the benefit of beach training was still a surprise. I lost weight and I've got more tone in my body.

But the biggest revelation came when I started to train Michael Sim at Portsea Beach in order to strengthen his trunk and legs. Michael had broken down on the Nationwide Tour last year, prior to earning his playing card to this year's US PGA Tour. Under the eye of his Perth-based coach David Milne, we felt Michael needed a stronger lower base. He tended to have a little bit of sway in his legs, which predisposed him to the pelvic injury that sidelined him last August.

Once Michael began to do functional exercises on sand (e.g. walking backwards and crawling on 'all fours'), we found that his overall posture improved dramatically. After coming off the beach, we analysed his address position with a three-dimensional biomechanical analysis. The results were quantifiable, indicating there had been a dramatic effect on his set-up. He actually had better 'feels' through his golf muscles (gluts, inner thighs, shoulders) and could set himself a lot better over the ball.

This led me to study Percy Cerutti, one of the legendary coaches of Australian sport. The eccentric Cerutti was instrumental behind Herb Elliott winning the 1,500 metres gold medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics. Fellow miler John Landy also tried Cerutti's methods. And four-time Olympic gold medallist Betty Cuthbert trained with him while she made a courageous comeback for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

I've had inspiration from the fact that Cerutti used to train his athletes on the sandhills of Portsea on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula (coincidentally, now one of the great golf destinations of the world). Cerutti's own times for the mile were phenomenal.

And all he used to do was train 'primally'. A lot of his work involved running on sand – an acknowledgment to how the Spartans and Greeks trained.

Having read Cerutti's biography, (*Why Die?* by Graem Sims), I found there was a direct relationship between golf and athletics and the use of sand and beachwork to enhance performance.

All roads lead to Portsea

What Cerutti did was quite amazing, ahead of its time. It was clear to me that people would come from all over the world to train at Portsea because it's such a natural environment. Perth-born Elliott was a great example. Even when he was offered a lucrative contact to go to America, he chose to stay at Portsea and study at university. Other people kept being drawn back because they thought they were getting something totally unique out of Portsea. So that actually pushed a button with me.

Apart from Michael Sim, I've had many golfers come to train with me at beaches and sandhills across the country, notably Brett Rumford, Shani Waugh, Rick Kulacz, several promising New Zealanders and the Scottish national men's team. In particular, Lloyd Saltman, who tied for 15th as an amateur at the 2005 British Open, has shown great progress since returning to Europe where he's won four times this year.

All of the golfers found there was a significant relevance to the golf-specific training that we did on the beach. I should emphasise that it's not about running up sandhills until you spew. It's very cerebral, combining the mind with co-ordination and function, and then relating it back to the golf swing.

In the accompanying photos, you can see the golfers are walking backwards along the beach (above), which is a counterbalance exercise to the flexed posture of the golf stance. I also like them to run backwards on sand dunes and inclines. (Just remember that it's not always permissible to train on sensitive



As strange as it looks, learning to crawl again can have a dramatic effect on your golf posture.

sandhills in some coastal areas.)

As golfers are in flexed postures, they need to work their gluts and lower abdominals together for good spinal control. With the tidal work, we use the 'rip' of the waves to facilitate a 'controlled' movement. The push and drag of natural waves co-ordinate a golfer's body and increase the balance and composure.

I liken my approach to training golfers as bull ants. If you've ever seen a bull ant, you'll notice they are very strong and have great posture: a bull ant can lift at least 10 times its own body weight. That's why I get my golfers to crawl along the sand on 'all fours'.

The reason I concentrate on this 'primal movement' is because it forces the entire body to work at once. It causes oxygen deprivation, so the golfer has to co-ordinate his body under a certain amount of mental and physiological stress. They have to make decisions with their mind, while the whole body is 'working', which simulates a golfer under pressure in competition.

You'll find that a lot of golfers, especially if they're poorly co-ordinated, will only use the right arm and right leg in the golf swing at the same time. You actually have to sequence the left arm and right knee and vice versa,



Beach training is not just mindless sandhill runs. It should also combine co-ordination with function.

the right arm and left knee. You've got to crossover and a lot of people can't do that because they don't have the control or energy levels. They fatigue very quickly. In that respect, sand shows the character of a golfer, for instance, the person who gives in too easily and the golfer who is mentally strong.

Life's a beach for golfers

In summary, the first major benefit of working on sand is that it's a natural environment. Generally, golfers prefer to train outdoors because they're used to being on a golf course. Secondly, the sand moves, so all of your muscles have to react and 'work' to control the movement. Thirdly, by working through the hands and feet, a golfer gets more 'feel' as a result from the texture of the sand. Four, it's mentally challenging and this has a direct relationship to the mental challenges of golf. With the specific functional exercises that we do, the golfer can only go as quickly as his body will allow him. In that way, the exercises are similar to the requirements of a golf swing. It doesn't matter how fast you swing the club, it's how well you sequence that movement.

As mentioned, another virtue of sand is that it's non-weight bearing. You don't get the shock that you get by training on hard roads and concrete. And I've found that you don't tend to get the lactic acid build-up, nor is there joint or muscular pain the next day. These days, I take an increasing number of 50 and 60-year-olds onto the beach. It certainly has a major benefit on people with arthritis and back injuries.

Functional beach exercises help the body to return to its natural movement pattern. If you ever watch a baby on sand, it moves across the sand so well. And that's really what we need to go back to. We've forgotten how to crawl! If you can't crawl, how can you expect to hit a golf ball? If you can't crawl, how do you expect to walk properly over eight kilometres on a golf course? If you can't crawl, how can you have a balanced golf swing?

Ramsay McMaster is a world authority on golf-specific physiotherapy. For more information about golf-specific programs, phone The Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic on (03) 9569 9448.

