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Hitting the gym key to success for older golfers

Researchers from The University of Notre Dame Australia have found that hitting the gym rather than hitting balls at the driving range is the key to improving golfing performance for older players who suffer from age-related aches and pains.

Exercise and Sport Science Head of Discipline Dr Chris Joyce said older players tend to suffer from musculo-skeletal conditions such as osteoarthritis and osteoporosis, which impact on their flexibility, strength, endurance and balance – all of which can impede their golfing ability.

“We’ve always been told that practice makes perfect, but if you are not able to move freely and without pain, practice alone can only help to a certain point,” Dr Joyce said.

“By adding a six-week course of strength and conditioning training to a group of older players’ normal practice and playing regimes, we found that their general mobility and fitness improved significantly, which also resulted in real improvements in their golf game.

“Importantly, participants also told us that being stronger and fitter resulted in them having fewer injuries and less post game soreness, enabling them to play more regularly.”

- **Study involved 31 male and female players aged over 55.**
- **Each was tested at start for general fitness, balance, flexibility and grip strength.**
- **Golf performance was also measured using an indoor simulator to measure club head speed and ball velocity, carry distance, and accuracy for a range of clubs.**
- **21 players who had musculo-skeletal issues were required to do two supervised gym sessions per week, in addition to playing and practicing.**
- **The other 10 players with no muscular skeletal issues did no gym work and played and practiced as normal, serving as a control group.**

At the end of the six week training program, both groups were retested. The gym training group saw greater improvements across 85 per cent of the physical fitness measures when compared to the control group. Significantly, they also saw greater improvements in about 60 per cent of the golf performance indicators, with the biggest gains being around ball velocity and carry.

Dr Joyce said that while the benefits of strength and conditioning training for professional golfers were well known, very little research had been done on older players.

“What our study showed conclusively is that strength training can improve both physical function and golfing performance for people with age-related musculo-skeletal conditions in a surprisingly short period of time,” Dr Joyce said.

“People in this age group already experience a 10 per cent drop in muscle mass each decade, along with cartilage degeneration and general joint stiffness, which is why it is so important that they remain active and strong.

“Improving their physical fitness can also prolong their participation in a sport where social interaction and well-being is the main reason for playing. Being able to socialize and interact with peers in this age group is important for mental health”.

Golf participation in Australia is currently at an all-time high, with club memberships increasing by 6.3 per cent during the pandemic. The 55-to-64 age group is the second fastest growing demographic behind 18-to-34-year-olds.

As part of the study, participants were asked to describe the benefits of the strength training. Below is a sample of their comments:

- *“I do feel stronger and more athletic in my set up. I believe I’m able to drive the ball further if I get my swing right. On the course, I’ve driven further than I normally would, outdriving friends who normally out drive me.”*
- *“More flexibility, better rotation, able to control shots (a bit) better. A lot less soreness after games. No games missed because of soreness. No injuries.”*
- *“I think I play more confidently. My scores have improved a little bit. I can play a round within my physical condition more easily now.”*
- *“Enjoyed doing the workouts, it wasn’t a chore. I felt livelier and a sense of achievement from seeing the gradual improvement in strength.”*

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