

I've been playing golf since my early teens, and a big part of my life as a golfer has been reading about the game.

I must have read hundreds of books about golf, but recently I stumbled upon one of the best books on the subject I have ever read, Peter Thomson's *A Life in Golf*.

In terms of his pure ability to win, Peter Thomson may be the most distinguished golfer Australia ever produced. He won more than a 100 tournaments around the world including five Open Championships. But one of his greatest achievements has been articulating how he became such a successful golfer.

*A Life in Golf* is a slim and profound book about the mysteries of life as a golfer. The only book I can compare it to is by Harvey Penick, a legendary American golf coach. Harvey Penick's *Little Red Book* became the best selling golf book ever published. Thomson's book is very similar to Harvey Penick's *Little Red Book* in that it contains nuggets of information on golf and fascinating anecdotes rather than a complete guide to every aspect of the game.

These days most professional golfers spend hundreds of hours a year hitting balls on the driving range. So it is refreshing to hear Peter Thomson's thoughts on the subject of practice. He firmly believes that the best way to learn to play golf is to spend your time on the course rather than the driving range. Thomson says that if you have an hour to spare you should simply go out and play six holes rather than hitting a bucket of balls at the driving range.

The standard warm up for most rounds of professional golf involves the better part of an hour on the driving range. Compare that to the way professional golfers used to warm up during Thomson's life as a professional. He says that in his day it was enough to warm up for a day's play by hitting a dozen wedge shots.

The hallmark of Thomson's career as a golf professional was the ease with which he seemed to win. He was a dapper, relaxed figure on the golf course and he appeared to be quite unflappable under pressure. It was always a mystery to me how Thomson managed to appear so calm while playing championship golf. But in his book he provides a wonderful explanation of how he managed it. He notes that: "You will think best when you are happiest. If you are at peace with your environment you are master and nothing baffles you. It is a good idea to make up your mind to like a course you are about to play, to like the people you are playing with and to enjoy the weather, hot or cold. Go about things with a smile on your face. Look as if you are enjoying it. Overcome yourself and you will overcome everyone else."

It is worthwhile comparing Thomson's approach to the awful psychological struggles other Australian golfers like Greg Norman and Adam Scott have endured as they tried to win major championships.

In his foreword to *A Life in Golf*, US Open Champion Geoff Ogilvy praises Thomson's approach to golf by saying that Thomson's words "have a way of making a game we all make too complicated seem so much simpler. You see, the game for Thomson is a simple matter: see a target and, while avoiding hazards, hit

to the target. Why worry about anything else?” Ogilvy adds that *A Life in Golf* is “a glimpse into a mind that sees the game differently to most of us. Better than most of us.”

Thomson’s anecdotes about the dominant golfers of his generation are also a delight. He talks at length about the great golfers like Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and Gary Player.

But Thomson reserves most of his praise for the sheer technical mastery of Ben Hogan. Thomson writes that: “Ben Hogan could go a whole tournament, that’s four rounds, without mis-hitting once. I’ve seen him do it. The precision of Hogan’s striking was incredible. I don’t believe anybody has approached that, not even Nicklaus.”

Some of Thomson’s best anecdotes are about the great South African golfer Bobby Locke and the American Sam Snead.

You don’t read a lot about Sam Snead these days, but most golf professionals agree that Snead was the greatest natural athlete ever to play professional golf.

Most of us are aware that Tiger Woods is chasing Jack Nicklaus’ record of 18 major championships. But we tend to forget that Woods is also chasing Sam Snead’s record for of 82 wins on the PGA Tour.

The Sam Snead that we glimpse on the pages of Thomson’s book is a delightful and charming man.

Snead grew up as the son of a poor Virginian backwoods farmer, but went on to win over 160 events worldwide. His swing was so natural and fluid that he had a very long career. At the age of 67 he became the first player to score below his age in a PGA tour event.

As a golfer he seemed quite fearless.

But Thomson recalls that at a US Masters Dinner in the early 50’s Snead was asked if there was anything in golf that did scare him. Snead replied: “Yes, a three foot putt downhill – and Ben Hogan.”

*A Life in Golf* by Peter Thomson (written with Steve Perkin) and foreword by Geoff Ogilvy.

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