

Articles and Tips - Tool Time II

Learn to hit more accurate pitch shots by practicing with hula hoops



Some of the best teaching aides for use by yourself or with your PGA professional can be found in unexpected places. Last month, we discussed how practicing with a 3-foot metal yardstick can help you start draining three- and six-foot putts as if they were tap-ins. The yardstick training aide can be acquired for less than \$2 at your local hardware store.

This month, I want you to visit the toy store. For another investment of less than \$10, practicing with three or four classic hula hoops will drastically improve your short game.

It would be great if we hit every green in regulation. For most of us, that never happens. Thus, learning to hit accurate pitch shots from around and just off the green will help lower your scores. The hula hoop—that plastic, circular toy made famous in the 1950s and '60s—is a perfect teaching aide to dial in your wedges.

What I do is place four, standard-sized hula hoops on the ground out in front of my student at various distances, such as 10, 15, 20 and 25 yards from where we're hitting pitch shots. So the hula hoops are very far away—just little pitch-shot distances.

The goal of this drill is to engrain a feel for distance control and launch control for pitch shots around the green. Instead of pitching these practice shots on a putting green or practice green, I want my students to practice landing their pitch shots inside the hula hoops at the different distances.

It's important to note that that you're not trying to stop the ball inside the hula hoops. You're only trying to land the ball inside the hoop. When you're faced with a greenside pitch shot during a round, the key is find the spot where you want to land your shot—taking into account how the shot should roll out, spin or check once it lands. This drill helps will help immensely and provide confidence in your decisions on where to land the shot.

The point of the drill is to pinpoint feel for 10 yards, 15 yards, 25 yards and so on at a specific launch angle. You want to see the ball launch at the same height for all the shots. You want the arc of the pitch shots to be at the same heights, but you learn how to carry the shot five yards farther for the 15-yard hula hoop, 15 yards farther for the 25-yarder, etc.

If I see the same launch for all the distances, then I know my student has effective loft on that wedge. I like to see my students use their 54-degree or 56-degree wedges for these pitch shots instead of their 60-degree wedge.

By using the 54 or the 56 and opening the face a little, they'll use the trailing edge of the club to slide through the grass without making a divot. When you master that, then you know that the clubface is effectively the right loft.

The big question is: Can you maintain the same loft as you hit these shots to the different hula hoops?

Once you have that consistent launch height and can land the ball inside the different hoops, you might try to hit pitch shots into the hoops with two or three different launch heights. You'll soon develop a variety of pitch shots: a low pitch, a stock pitch and a flop-like pitch.

Pitching shots to the hula hoop teaching aides is a fun way to practice. You have targets, which keeps your practice purposeful. You also get immediate feedback, as you see where your shots land. Using the hula hoops to practice your pitch shots creates an enjoyable way to increase your distance and launch control for pitch shots around the green.