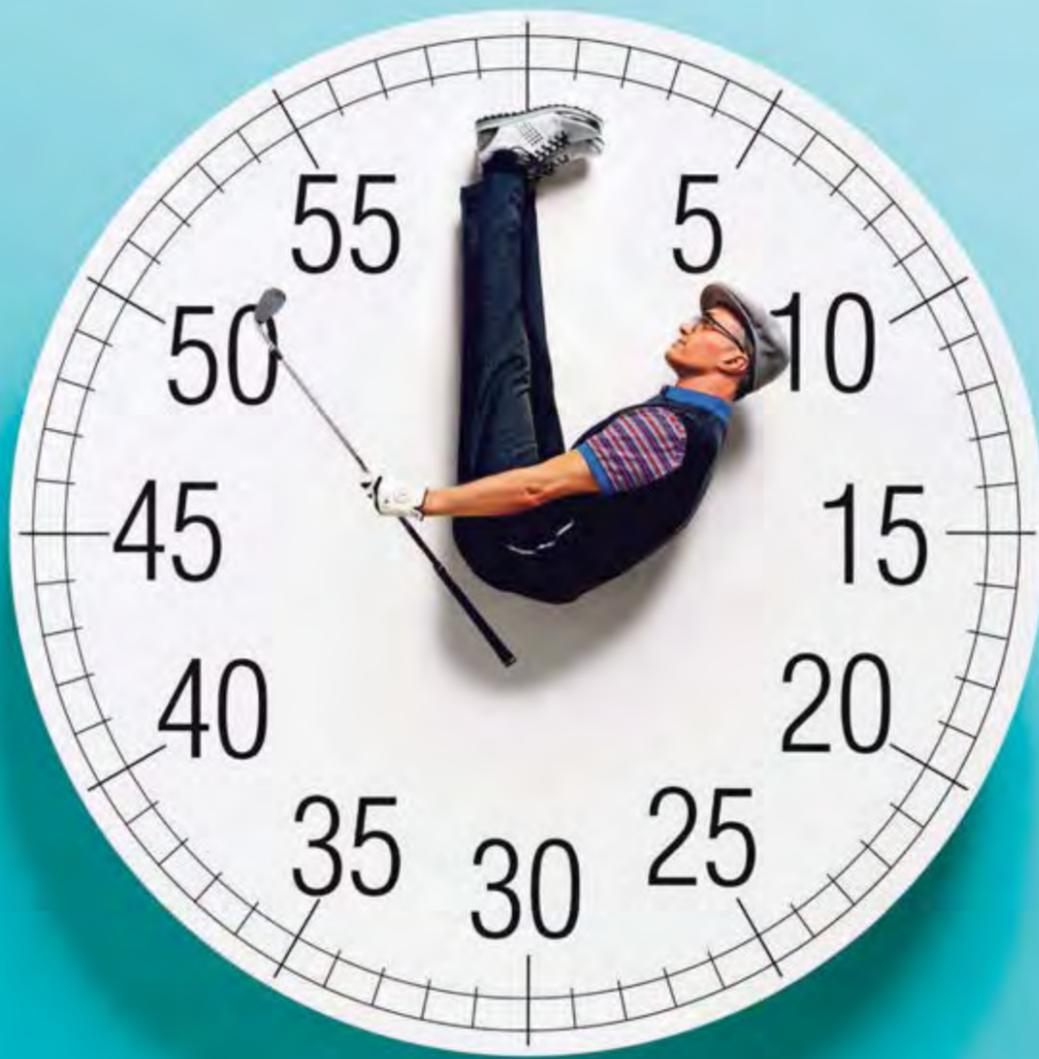


BY BOB CARNEY

8-SECOND RULE

ARE YOU STANDING OVER
THE BALL TOO LONG?

It's a simple question, and it seems like an important one: How long should it take to hit a golf shot? Rummage through most instruction books, and you'll find a lot on the subject of timing, but little on time.



That's why a new book called *Golf's 8 Second Secret: What separates golf's greatest champions*, by PGA pro Mike Bender and accomplished amateur Michael Mercier, has provoked debate.

The authors argue that a shot – from the time you set your lead foot, step over the ball and swing to the finish – should take eight seconds.

This period occurs only after a golfer has carefully evaluated conditions, incorporated swing thoughts and narrowed his or her focus. In other words, there is no going back.

Bender and Mercier studied dozens of the game's greats through TV coverage, film footage, even old photographic sequences, and that's the consistent duration it took them – from Bobby Jones to Mickey Wright to Phil Mickelson.

Others, such as Lee Westwood, tend to take longer or vary the time, especially under pressure, and that invites problems.

The authors add that before they even step in, a player's pre-shot routine should take no more than 10 to 12 seconds, for a total of about 20.

Do you get it done that fast? Judging from an informal study of amateurs at a public course, most weekenders aren't even close.

They are check-listers, reviewing the do's and don'ts as they stand over the ball, sometimes for as long as 20 seconds.

Double that time when you add their pre-shot routine.

Though Bender and Mercier believe we all could use an eight-second shot clock, some of the game's most prominent coaches aren't as convinced.

They do agree, however, on three things: (1) You should swing without delay once over the ball; (2) That time ought to be consistent for every shot; (3) It's personal.

The coaches supported the book's organisation of the shot process.

They say sizing up a shot can take any amount of time.

DEBATING SHOT SELECTION WHILE OVER THE BALL INVITES POOR PERFORMANCE.

Tour pros, for instance, tend to spend more time deciding about escape shots or unpractised shots around the green.

But once the decision is made, rehearsal and execution should take no more than 20 seconds and must be consistent.

The idea is to progress from conscious calculation to instinctive motion as you decide, picture, feel and finally act.

Mixing the stages, such as still debating club selection while standing over the ball, invites poor performance.

"If you take too long over the ball, your feet get landlocked," says instructor Dean Reinmuth.

"Then your whole lower body feels stuck. The upper body gets quicker. So your motion looks too quick, but really what happened is, you took too long."

Sport psychologist Gio Valiante agrees with the authors, to a point: "I've talked about 20 seconds from pre-shot to finish. But it's a range. Some players are at 23, some at 17. You can't make it a rigid thing. Everybody copies the best players in the world. But the best players don't copy anyone."

Only one of the 25 or so Hall of Famers Bender and Mercier studied – Jack Nicklaus – varied from the eight-second rule.

He did that, they say, because he spent less time on his pre-shot routine and noticeably longer over the ball, but still totalling 18 to 20 seconds.

"Almost always under pressure there is a tendency to take more time," says sports psychologist Bob Rotella.

"But the real problem is when you start taking too much time between the last look at the target and the swing. I try to get guys going with their first instinct. That one is all about confidence and commitment. The second one can be filled with fear and doubt."

Rotella often asks clients to make a practice swing, inevitably fluid and

relaxed, and then suggests they build a routine around that.

Josh Zander, a Golf Digest Teaching Professional who played in the 1992 US Open, cautions that no matter the time taken, you must feel ready to hit.

"Sometimes I count to four as I approach the ball. Then I see an image of the shot, and my brain tells me we're ready to go. I'd be surprised if it weren't eight seconds or less. But the key is to go when your brain gives you the signal.

"Remember Sergio Garcia, the way he gripped and re-gripped the club? The thing I admired about that was that he wouldn't go until he was ready."

Bender and Mercier say that's why great players take only eight seconds.

Any longer is bad for confidence and focus.

It's precisely why Garcia and Westwood haven't won Majors, they say.

Sports psychologist Richard Coop studied the 20-second zone a decade ago.

His take: More important than a consistent time is what happens during that time.

"A lot of golfers have rituals but not routines," he says.

"In other words, you've gone through the ritual of motions, but not really been there, done the routine."

Coop's advice on time: "Find what it is you're doing over the ball that's taking so long – and still not working – and eliminate it." **G**