

Golf Week: “Let’s play nine”

What ‘slow’ players can learn from Christopher Smith, the world’s fastest speed golfer

By James Achenbach

Enough of the 14-club rule.

I challenge all golfers to play with nine clubs.

Golf originated as a walking game. It should remain so. Too often we mindlessly jump into motorized carts and forget about the health benefits of walking.

Bring back walking. Play with nine clubs.

Nine clubs are perfect for walking and carrying a bag – enough to balance the bag, not too much to weigh it down. Using a hand cart, nine clubs are a breeze.

Nine clubs also are perfect for learning comprehensive skills on the course. Nine clubs are a ticket to improvement for serious golfers.

Why nine? Because golf is a game of nines. Because nine is a long way from 14, the worldwide limit on the number of clubs in the bag. Because nine works well in the configuration of the modern set.

I give complete credit for the nine-club round to teaching professional Christopher Smith of Pumpkin Ridge Golf Club in North Plains, Ore. He does it all the time.

In the 2006 Oregon Open, Smith shot 11 under par for 54 holes and tied for first, losing a playoff. He carried nine clubs all the way.

Smith’s nine-club set: driver, 4-wood (17 degree), hybrid (21 degree), 5-iron, 7-iron, 9-iron, pitching wedge (52 degree), sand wedge (58 degree) and putter.

My preferred nine-club combination: driver, 5-wood (19 degree), hybrid (23 degree), 6-iron, 8-iron, pitching wedge (48 degree), sand wedge (54 degree), lob wedge (60 degree) and putter.

For golfers who play frequently on small greens or who generally miss a lot of greens, substituting a lob wedge for some other club probably is a wise decision.

Anyway, play five rounds with 14 clubs. Then play five rounds with nine clubs. Compare the scores. Most avid golfers will be surprised at their expertise with nine clubs.

The nine-club round fosters imagination. It requires a golfer to hit a variety of less-than-full shots. It brings finesse into play in a major way.

In 2005, Smith shot a 5-under 65 in a speed-golf tournament at Jackson Park Golf Course in Chicago. He used only six clubs and completed the round in 44 minutes and 6 seconds. Incredibly, that's an average of less than 2 1/2 minutes per hole.

That is a world record. Scores in speed golf are determined by adding the score and the time.

In watching Smith, it has occurred to me that most of us are missing something by playing with 14 clubs.

Smith talks about "learning and playing golf in faster, more instinctive and less conscious ways." I have never been able to grasp the essence of people who advise, "Just swing at the ball," but I have come to believe Smith is indeed the world's foremost expert at banishing swing thoughts and playing a spontaneous game.

"Playing with less than a full tool set forces a golfer to hit shots rather than make golf swings," Smith says. "It's what all good players do. A limited arsenal forces a player to use his or her imagination to make the ball travel in the desired direction. It heightens feel and creativity."

Now it gets interesting. Smith treats mis-hits as the nucleus of golf.

"As you and I know, golf is a game of mis-hits. At the end of the day, the guy holding the trophy is the one whose crappy shots were of the highest quality," he said. "Playing with fewer clubs provides a greater margin of error."

"What the nine-club arrangement allows me to do, particularly when it comes to approach shots into greens, is to choose the stronger-lofted club, and swing with less effort, which in turn produces greater accuracy. If I hit it a little thin, fat, or off the heel or toe, my result is still acceptable. I always have enough club in my hand."

"Most poor approach shots are hit when we try to hit an iron, hybrid or fairway club too hard or too perfect – often because it is not enough club in the first place. So we frequently end up short of the green."

After talking with Smith, I decided to chart all my rounds and keep track of where my approach shots ended in relationship to the green and hole location. Invariably my worst rounds were full of shots that ended up short.

"The nine-club concept helps eliminate doubt," Smith said. "Having fewer choices tends to simplify decision making. Many players waffle between clubs (the best example being Colin Montgomerie on the 72nd hole of the 2006 U.S. Open, the one that Monty lost because of indecision)."

Smith has another idea for serious tournament players: Use nine clubs in practice, then play 14 in competition. Somehow, he says, the result will be more decisive golf.

For those who play golf largely for exercise, nine clubs is the featherweight choice.

“When I pick up a bag now with 14 clubs,” he says, “I feel as if someone has replaced the golf balls with bowling balls. Heck, I wouldn’t want to carry it either.”

In support of a simpler way to play golf, Smith has a new book, “I’ve got 99 Swing Thoughts but ‘Hit the Ball’ ain’t one,” and a new CD, “Better Golf.”

“I realized that I was shooting my best scores when I was running,” he says about speed golf. “I asked myself why I was playing so well, and an answer emerged: It’s easier to play golf this way, having little time. It turns golf into a reactionary sport, rather than an overanalyzing, contemplative, paralysis-by-analysis sport.”

Walk quickly, carry nine big sticks.