

## The Five Iron

Golf is a great game for a pessimist. When I step up to the first tee at my home course, I am supremely confident that my shot will slice into the river. I'm rarely disappointed, except for the times when I top it so badly that it doesn't make it that far. I've tried the latest clubs, private lessons, self-hypnosis – but nothing changes the fact that I suck at golf. The frustrating thing is that I don't do too badly on the range, and when I play a course I hit just enough good shots to convince myself that I *could* master this game. All I need to do is to figure out how to consistently hit the ball the way I know I *can* hit it, instead of the way I usually *do* hit it. I guess that's what keeps me coming back.

The one time my luck changed was when I bought the five iron. Fred had run over my old one with a golf cart (Don't ask how that happened. Things like that just happen when Fred's around) and I needed a replacement before the weekend. I had ordered one to match the rest of my clubs but it wouldn't be in for another week, so I stopped by a local sporting goods store. They had a barrel of used clubs by the door for \$10 bucks apiece and I figured one of those would do just fine for the weekend. I picked out a Ben Hogan Apex Edge that didn't look too badly worn. I made some pretty good shots with that club over the weekend, and then set it aside when my new club arrived.

This was about the time my wife took up golf. She'd always been skeptical about golf, calling it a game where grown men played fetch with themselves, but I finally talked her into taking lessons at a local community college and she really enjoyed it. I bought her a set of clubs and we started playing regularly. For some reason she didn't like her composite irons, so one weekend I suggested she try the Hogan 5-iron instead of her composite. She loved it. The first time she used it her ball sailed majestically through the air, landed on the green, and came to rest a few inches from the cup. From that day on she used that club as much as possible, even on shots that really demanded a shorter or longer club. Her scores began to improve dramatically, too. It's amazing how many strokes you can cut from your game if you have just one club you can hit reliably. Soon she was nipping at my heels, and beating me when I had a bad day.

To say I was surprised would be a gross understatement. I'd been playing for years, and although I never kidded myself that I was a great golfer it still hurt that my wife began beating me within a few months of taking her first lesson. That damned 5-iron seemed to be the key to her game, although her shots with other clubs were improving too. Occasionally she let me try a shot or two with that club, and it was magic in my hands. I hadn't realized what a good club it was when I had it, and now it was too late. I jokingly suggested that maybe I ought to reconsider letting her use "my" club, but she immediately let me know it would be a cold day in hell before I got my hands on that club again.

At first this didn't seem like a major problem. I went on e-Bay, searched for a Hogan 5-iron, and bought the best one I could find. It was a real beauty. Gleaming chrome head, graphite shaft, and the original Ben Hogan autographed grip. It looked like it had never been used. After trying it a few times, I could see why the previous owner hadn't used it. It wasn't that it was a bad club, it was just no better than the 5-iron I already had. It didn't have the magic of the club I'd given to my wife. Clearly I was going to have to find an exact duplicate of that club. That proved to be more difficult than I had expected. One night I sneaked the 5-iron out of my wife's bag, took photos of it, and wrote down every identification mark I could find. Then I began searching golf stores, e-Bay, used sporting goods stores – every place I could think of. I found lots of Ben Hogan 5-irons (I had no idea the man made so many different styles of 5-irons!) but none that matched my wife's club. Finally, after weeks of searching, one turned up on e-Bay. Anxious to make certain nobody outbid me, I put in a maximum bid of \$500. It sold for \$501.

I was miserable. My golf game got even worse than it had been. Now I couldn't make a shot with any club. Meanwhile, my wife just got better and better. I began to dread our weekend games together. She'd send the ball soaring down the fairway while I'd be off hacking in the weeds. My pride wouldn't let me give up, but every time we played my pride took another beating. I began to find excuses to not play with her. My back hurt. I had to go into the office to work on an urgent project. I sprained my wrist helping a colleague move his desk.

Finally, another identical club appeared on e-Bay. Realizing how valuable these clubs must be I put in a maximum bid of \$1,000. I won the bidding at \$17.50, plus shipping. Was there something wrong with this club? When it arrived I checked it over carefully. It was identical to my wife's club in every respect. Excitedly I talked her into playing golf that night, after work, instead of waiting until our usual weekend tee time. The club was a dud. I splayed shots all over the course with it. I hit worm burners with it. Once I even missed the ball completely and had to take a stroke for a "whiff," something I hadn't done in years. Clearly the magic was not in the club's design. There was something extraordinary that was specific to my wife's club. I didn't know what it was, but I knew I had to have that club. Late that night, while she was asleep, I slipped out of bed, tiptoed into the garage, and switched 5-irons with her.

It was hard to wait until the next weekend to try it out, but I didn't want to arouse her suspicions by pushing for another early game. Finally the day arrived. On the first tee I pretended to select my driver and then, as if on a whim, I pulled out the 5-iron instead. "I think maybe I'll just try for a short, straight shot instead of going for distance" I said as nonchalantly as possible. "I haven't had much luck with my driver on this tee." The club seemed to swing effortlessly in my hands, and the ball sailed down the center of the fairway as straight as an arrow. I got a good roll, and the ball wound up within 5-iron range of the green. Another beautiful shot with my Hogan beauty and I was on the green. Even with two putts I made par.

The rest of the game drifted by as if I was dreaming, and at times I thought maybe I was. A five iron is a pretty versatile club and I made the most of it. Fairway shots, tee shots on short holes, bump and run approaches to the green – I used that club as often as I possibly could without making my wife suspicious. Of course there were times when I had to use another club and those shots were pretty disappointing, but I used that 5-iron enough to easily best my wife's score.

After that, things just kept getting better and better. Every week my score improved. Soon I was not only beating my wife, I was beating Fred and the rest of my foursome as well. Everything was just about perfect. Then the guilt started to set in. Every time my wife missed a shot my spirits sank, for I knew she would have made the shot if I hadn't stolen her club. I cringed whenever anyone complimented me on one of my shots, for I knew I was cheating. We'd always made side bets in my foursome. Nothing much, usually just who paid for beer and lunch, but now I felt like a thief whenever someone else paid for lunch and the beer was bitter on my tongue. Once I even had a nightmare about being chased off the course by a deranged Lee Trevino. He was driving a Rolls-Royce golf cart and shaking that damned 5-iron at me. The final blow was when my wife signed up for the Lady's Tournament at our club. I knew she didn't have a chance without the 5-iron. I thought about just slipping it back into her bag, but she hadn't been playing her 5-iron much lately (Who could blame her with that dud I stuck her with?) and I was afraid she wouldn't discover the magic until it was too late. Besides, I was tired of living a lie. It was time to come clean.

I told her in the car, as we were driving to the course for our weekly game. I apologized profusely. I was prepared for screaming. I was prepared for the silent treatment. I was prepared for her to insist I turn the car around and take her straight home, because she'd never play golf with me again. What I wasn't prepared for was laughter.

"I can't believe you got so worked up over a golf club" she laughed. "I hate to burst your bubble, but I don't think there's anything special about that particular club. Anyway, that's not even the same club you gave me."

"It's not?!!" I replied.

"No, I lost that club. Or rather, Sarah lost it. You know how ladies play for half price on Tuesday morning? Well, Sarah and I were playing one morning and I let her try my 5-iron. You know how tense Sarah gets, so I told her to relax and I guess she relaxed too much because when she swung, the club flew out of her hands and landed in the river. Well I felt just terrible about that. I knew how much you liked that club so right away I went on e-Bay and bought another one just like it. You know I had to bid over \$500 to win that club? I had no idea those clubs were so valuable! I suppose I should have told

you at the time, but I didn't want to admit I'd lost the club you gave me so I tried to cover it up. I felt pretty guilty at the time, but I guess I needn't have worried about that!"

The laughter in her voice was replaced by a touch of sharpness in this last sentence. I slouched lower in my seat and remained silent.

"Anyway, the new club played just the same as the old one. I was playing just fine, but I finally realized I was being ridiculous by trying to play every shot with my 5-iron. If I could hit the ball with that club, I should be able to hit the ball with any club in my bag. The only thing special about that club was that I had confidence I in it. They say golf is 90% mental anyway, so I just made up my mind I could hit the ball with any club and it worked. You've been so wrapped up in trying to play the whole course with one club that you didn't notice how my drives have been getting better, my chipping has improved, and my putting has been pretty good. You were so confident that club made you unbeatable that you didn't even bother to add up the scores the last two times we played. I did, and I beat you both times. I'll bet if you just transferred a little of that confidence to your other clubs your game would improve, too."

I was astounded by what she'd said. If that wasn't the same club I'd started with, then there couldn't be anything special about the club. It was all in my head. And if that was true, then I should be able to hit equally good shots with any club. It was obvious I had the skill. Just look at the shots I'd made with that 5-iron! All I had to do was swing my other clubs the same way.

I strode up to the first tee with a surge of confidence. I had a twinge of doubt when I reached for my driver, so I pulled out my 5-iron. "Just for luck" I said with a wink to my wife. I took a smooth, confident swing. The ball bounced off the tee and rolled into the river.