First, the bad news: The technique you’re using on chips and pitches is wrong. You were probably taught the “body-moves-the-club” method that seems sensible but often results in skulls, chunks and poor touch. The good news? A new, scientifically proven short-game system is sweeping the PGA Tour, and it’s easy for you to learn. The Top 100 Teacher who discovered it (above left) shows you the new way to control shots from 40 yards and in, with help from his star pupil Nick Watney. Turn the page to join this short-game revolution and get up and down all day long!

By David DeNunzio
Photography by Angus Murray
Chipping Away

After struggling for four years on mini-tours at home and abroad, James Sieckmann turned to teaching—and had an epiphany that was changing the way pros and amateurs swing when they’re near the green.

Here’s how our new Top 100 Teacher went from a failed player to the Tour’s hottest short-game guru.

During the 1994 Players Championship, James Sieckmann, then 29, caddied for his older brother, Tom, a PGA Tour winner. After a valiant effort but failed attempt to make a dent on the leaderboard on the Asian Tour, the young Sieckmann had turned to teaching. He had worked under the tutelage of Dave Pelz at the short-game giant’s schools in Austin and Boca Raton, and was about to become the director of instruction at Shadow Ridge C.C. in Omaha. Nebr. He planned to turn this grass to help his brothers, and to do some homework.

When notloopingthatweek, Sieckmann paced the practice area, observing and recording several players on videotape. He captured Greg Norman hitting looping shots, Raymond Floyd chipping, and short-game savants Corey Pavin and Wayne Grady hitting lofted pitches. He also recorded two of his brother’s caddie friends, who would prove pivotal in his teaching of the short game: Tom Pernice, the one-time UCLA star, considered one of the best short-game players in the world, and Steve Ballesteros, the greatest greenside shotmaker of his era, if not ever.

The serendipitous genesis of the Sieckmann system started while Sieckmann was back home in Omaha—studying it over and over, forward and backward—he noticed some homework.

Dave Pelz credits Sieckmann’s work ethic as one reason for his ascendance. “James already had extensive knowledge of how to play the game when he worked for our schools,” says Pelz. “But the fact that he worked so hard on his own skills gave him a deep understanding of what it took to improve. And he had sincere empathy for the struggles that golfers of all skill levels endure, an attribute of all top-notch teachers.”

Success, if not celebrity, came in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Pernice met Sieckmann’s full-time short-game coach in 1998: “I credit James with prolonging my career because my scoring relies so much on short shots,” says Pernice) and helped his teacher land clients such as Charlie Wi, Skip Kendall, Frank Lickliter, Bob Tway and Duffy Waldorf. Despite a client list most instructors would die for, Sieckmann toiled in obscurity.

“Part of it stems from living in Omaha,” says Sieckmann. “And I never thought I should market myself or advertise. I was happy teaching the members at Shadow Ridge and seeing my guys out on Tour when they needed help.”

Sieckmann’s stock skyrocketed after 2009, when Greg Rose, co-founder of the Titleist Performance Institute, asked the best wedge player he knew—Pernice—to help Titleist staffer Ben Crane with his pitching and bunker game. “I just told [Crane] to go see my coach, James Sieckmann,” says Pernice.

Sieckmann met Crane at the Madison Club in La Quinta, Calif., in January 2010. They worked on address, plane and especially sequence. Crane was following the chain of events common to full swings: the hips or legs initiate the downswing, and the arms and club follow. But the method Sieckmann created from watching the likes of Ballesteros and Floyd reverses that sequence on swings when you’re 40 yards or less from the green. “Basically, the club is released from your chest in a flicking motion, and the hips reach maximum speed first, then pass the energy to the torso, then the arms, and finally the hands and clubhead. This ‘Kinetic Sequence’ is undisputed in golf teaching and research. But in a finesse swing, the sequence changes, and the grip hand at left (plotting the rotational speed of key body parts on a short-game swing) proves it. Notice that the club [orange line] moves first and fastest and that the torso [green line] and arms [blue line] immediately outpace the hips [red line] at the start of the downswing—the opposite of what you do in your full swing. Also notice how the chest keeps pace with the club, supporting its motion instead of slowing down into impact as it does on power swings. The lesson? Reverse your swing sequence for better touch on short shots.

Cover Story: New Short-Game System

The serendipitous genesis of the Sieckmann short-game system started while Sieckmann was back home in Omaha—studying it over and over—backward and forward—he noticed something unusual. Ballesteros, Pernice, Norman—all the top players—were breaking every short-game rule he’d learned. Sieckmann, like most of us, was always told to make a minor variation of his full swing and to keep his hands ahead of the clubhead, but there was something the club past his body with the touch of a tape. He captured Greg Norman hitting looping shots, Raymond Floyd chipping, and short-game savants Corey Pavin and Wayne Grady hitting lofted pitches. He also recorded two of his brother’s caddie friends, who would prove pivotal in his teaching of the short game: Tom Pernice, the one-time UCLA star, considered one of the best short-game players in the world, and Steve Ballesteros, the greatest greenside shotmaker of his era, if not ever.

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From chips to bunker shots to 40-yard pitches, here are James Sieckmann’s new rules for knocking down the flag with your short shots

1. **OLD WAY Your Body Moves the Club**
   NEW WAY The Club Moves Your Body

   Your short-game downswing isn’t an assertive strike propelled by your body. It’s little more than letting the clubhead fall back to the ball in a circle—letting gravity do the work—and then turning your chest to support the motion of the club. Your hips are mostly an afterthought. In fact, you shouldn’t turn them until the club gets back in front of your body.

2. **OLD WAY Square Stance at Address**
   NEW WAY Open Stance at Address

   Set your back foot square to your target line and flare your front foot with your heels almost touching. Opening up like this with your chest pointing more toward the target moves the low point of your swing in front of the ball, freeing up the clubhead to produce crisper contact.

3. **OLD WAY Lean Left and Keep Your Head Still**
   NEW WAY Let Energy Flow Toward the Target

   Good wedge players don’t keep their head rock-steady. Video evidence proves that they move their head toward the target a few inches during the backswing in what’s essentially a reverse weight shift; then they either keep their head still or move it even farther forward in the downswing. This gets energy flowing toward the target—a must for solid contact.

4. **OLD WAY “Out Across the Ball”**
   NEW WAY Trace an On-Plane Swing Path

   The most efficient way to deliver the club to the ball on a short shot is to swing the clubhead and clubhead on the plane line established by the lie angle at address. (Check if you’re doing this by swinging next to a mirror and charting the clubhead’s path in your reflection.) A neutral swing doesn’t require manipulation if the club is delivered on plane.

5. **OLD WAY Swing Square-to-Square**
   NEW WAY Rotate the Clubface

   As you swing the club back on plane, let the clubface rotate open. An open clubface lets you release the club properly without fear of hitting the ball left. A released clubhead produces a higher shot and allows you to use both the loft and bounce of the club to ensure better contact with the ball and ground.

6. **OLD WAY “Hold” Your Follow-Through**
   NEW WAY Release the Clubhead

   Despite what’s often taught, you shouldn’t “hold” on to your release by keeping your hands ahead of the clubhead past impact. Doing this requires tension, and tension destroys your rhythm and feel. In addition, it reduces the effective loft and bounce of the club, sharpening the leading edge so that’s more likely to stick into the turf (hello, fat shots).
How to Groove a Finesse Swing
Hit chips with one arm to feel the correct sequence of moves in your short-shot downswing

The new way to hit wedge shots comes down to changing the sequence in your downswing so that the club moves faster than your arms in the transition, then learning how to support the movement of the club with your arms and chest. To do this, try hitting shots with only your right arm (or your left, if you’re a southpaw). “I know it sounds simplistic,” says Sieckmann, “but it’s a powerful drill.” Why? “Hitting solid shots this way automatically creates the correct sequence in your swing, without any thinking on your part.” In other words, you must swing in the proper clubhead-leading-the-body motion or you’ll hit fat or thin shots. As you perform this drill, focus on the following:

1. Get the clubhead moving first. The club accelerates first and fastest, followed by your arms, chest and, finally, your hips. (Yes, this sequence is the exact opposite of what you use in full swings.)

2. Turn your chest through impact. This supports the release of the club and ensures that you don’t stop your arm swing at impact. Continue to swing your right arm past your body and smoothly accelerate the clubhead past your hands. You’ll know you did it correctly if, at the finish, your grip points at your belly and the face is slightly open.

3. Place your left hand on the grip while holding your finish. In order to fit your left hand on the handle, you’ll have to fold your left elbow and cup your left wrist (look for wrinkles on the back of your left wrist). These key moves to correctly release the clubhead and optimize loft and bounce.

If you can hit solid chips using only your right arm, then you have the feel for the finesse sequence found in all great short shots.

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CLUBHEAD GOES FIRST?
FOLLOWED BY THE RIGHT ARM
SUPPORTED BY THE CHEST AND HIPS

Add your left hand to the handle at the end of the drill for a more realistic feel of the proper swing and finish.

In a power swing, you want to generate as much speed as possible—left and bounce are unimportant. “In a finesse swing,” says Sieckmann, “you want to control speed and use left and bounce as assets.” There’s a change in mechanics as well as a switch in the way you mentally approach both swings. According to Sieckmann, the role of your lower body on short shots is to provide stability and balance. You don’t use it to create power. Notice how Nick Watney, a Sieckmann student since 2010, imitates his downward movement by moving the club first, before his body. Think of it as a gentle casting motion or, in our Top 100 Teacher’s words, “letting gravity be your friend.” You can see how Watney’s hips don’t really turn until after the club gets back in front of his body. “The feeling you’re after,” Sieckmann says, “is to have soft and relaxed arms that swing the club past your lower body while your chest smoothly rotates toward the target at the same pace.” If you hit your 5–iron this way, the ball would go nowhere.

“My biggest mistake is getting too much of my long-game swing in my short-game swing. Only when I learned to swing narrow and steep with the right side sequence did I learn that my short game could become a reliable scoring weapon.” —Nick Watney

Short and Sweet
Steal Nick Watney’s greenside secrets in this frame-by-frame lesson

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