

THE NEW WAY TO HIT YOUR WEDGES

TOUR-TESTED
AND PROVEN
BY 40+ PROS!



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’s 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 but failed attempt to make a dent on the leaderboards on the Asian Tour, the younger 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, Neb. He’d come to TPC Sawgrass to haul his big brother’s bag—and do some homework.

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

When Sieckmann reviewed the footage 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 miniature version of his full swing and to keep his hands ahead of the clubhead, but there was Seve swinging the club past his body with the touch of a surgeon. He was told to keep the clubface square on short shots, but there was Pernice rotating the face open in his backswing on both short and long pitch shots. He was told to keep his head still, but there was Floyd setting open with a flared left foot and moving his head toward the target.

Then a thunderbolt struck Sieckmann. The short-game swing that’s taught as gospel—and that he learned in junior golf,



Sieckmann on Tour and at work with (from top) Ben Crane, Charley Hoffman and Kevin Chappell.

and while a standout at the University of Nebraska, and from PGA teachers—was wrong. He was certain of it. “I’m not saying I was lied to,” says Sieckmann today, now 48. “People just didn’t know. Neither did I.” He smiles. “But suddenly I felt like I did.”

And now he had a plan to change the way golf is played around the greens.

Since the 1990s, Sieckmann has continued to spotlight the subtle technical differences between what golfers are taught versus what the best players do on short shots. His research and analysis has formed the backbone of the short-game method that’s now used by more than 40 players on the PGA and LPGA tours, and which he says is easily learnable for everyday players (see “6 New Ways to Hit Wedge Shots,” p. 112).

“The methods I teach are iron-clad,” boasts Sieckmann. “They’re born from the techniques used by some of the greatest short-game players in history—what they actually did, not just what they said they did.” He adds, “It’s nearly impossible for the average player to copy the full-swing mobility or sheer power of a Tour player, but he can easily copy the way the best pros dial it in from inside 40 yards.”

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.”

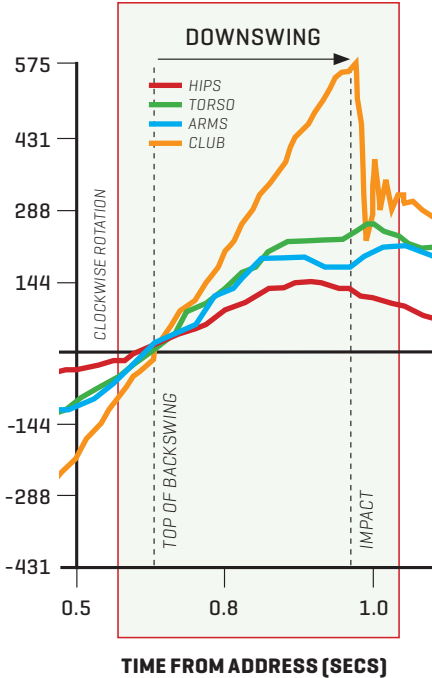
Success, if not celebrity, came in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Pernice made Sieckmann his full-time short-game coach in 1996 (“I credit James with prolonging my career because my scoring relies so much on short shots,” says Pernice) and helped his teacher land clients such as Charlie Wi, Skip Kendall, 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 →

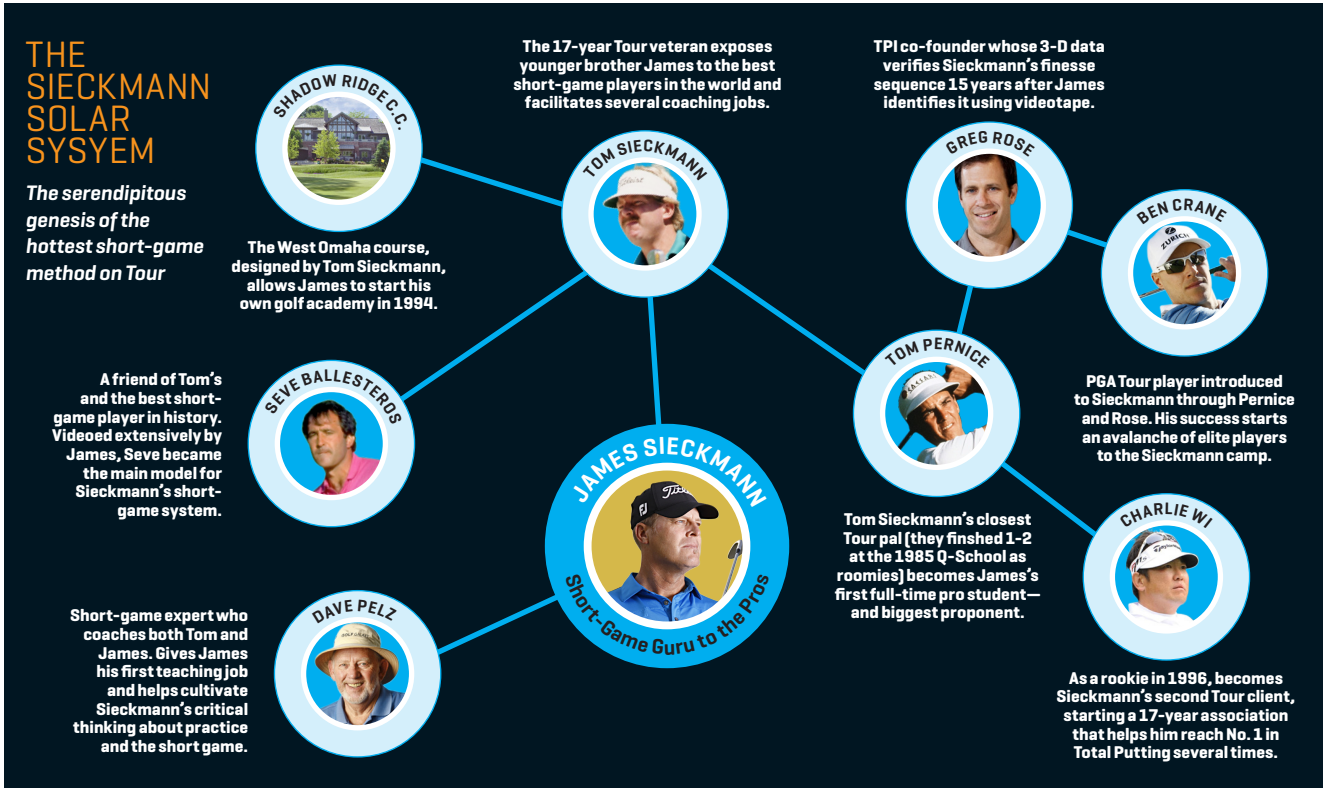


TPI’s motion-capture sequence of a Tour-level short swing validates Sieckmann’s theories.

THE SECRET'S IN THE SEQUENCE

Titleist’s 3-D motion-capture data proves Sieckmann’s system is correct—20 years after he began teaching it.

In a solid **power swing**, 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 graph 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.





Bo Van Pelt is the latest in a long line of Tour stars to seek out Sieckmann and unlock the new secrets to wedge play.

clubhead moves faster than the arms and hands in the transition” says Sieckmann. “And that revelation can be an eye-opener.”

Crane’s eyes were opened wide. One month after his session with Sieckmann, Crane won the 2010 Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pines en route to setting a career high in season winnings with \$2.8 million. A week later, Sieckmann met with Brad Faxon, a famously deft chipper and putter. Even the eight-time Tour winner was wowed by Sieckmann’s insights. “He knows more about the short game than anyone I’ve ever met,” said Faxon.

Soon, Sieckmann’s stable of students grew to include Charley Hoffman, Nick Watney, Camilo Villegas, Kyle Stanley, I.K. Kim, Cameron Tringale, Jeff Overton, Bo Van Pelt and some 30 other touring professionals. “The floodgates opened for him after Ben,” says Titleist’s Rose.

Rose adds that three-dimensional computer mapping by the Titleist Performance Institute suggests that Sieckmann’s short-swing philosophy—“it’s a finesse sequence, not a power sequence”—is dead on (see graph, previous page). “We had data on hundreds

Says Sieckmann’s student Nick Watney, who went from 146th to 12th in Scrambling in just one season, “The most important thing I’ve learned is that the short-game swing is the direct opposite of the long game.”

of elite short swings, but didn’t fully understand it until I met James,” admits Rose.

Says Sieckmann’s star pupil, five-time Tour winner Nick Watney, “The most important thing I’ve learned from him is that the short-game swing is the direct opposite of the long game.” Indeed, Watney went from 146th in Scrambling in 2010 to 12th in 2011. “In full swings you want width and power, but with a wedge you want less width and more finesse, so the sequence has to change.”

For his part, Sieckmann now sees his years toiling away in Asia—hitting countless bags of numberless balls, all seemingly ending in failure—as a stroke of luck. “Because I did everything wrong,” he says, “I know what’s right.” ■

6 New Ways to Hit Wedge Shots

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. If your hips turn first, as they do on full swings, the club will drop under plane and the face will stay open (which causes those weak shots to the right). In other words, swing with finesse, not power.

- 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** “Cut 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 clubshaft 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 club 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 it’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, the 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 are key moves to correctly release the clubhead and optimize loft and bounce.



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

Short and Sweet

Steal Nick Watney's greenside secrets in this frame-by-frame lesson

In a power swing, you want to generate as much speed as possible—loft and bounce are unimportant. "In a finesse swing," says Sieckmann, "you want to control speed and use loft 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, initiates 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. "Essentially," he says, "great wedge players are weak on purpose."



"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 sequence did I learn that my short game could become a reliable scoring weapon." —Nick Watney

FINESSE ON TOUR

James Sieckmann's Full-Time Tour Students

Nick Watney
12th in Scrambling (2011)

Bo Van Pelt
+57 spots in Proximity to Pin from 50-75 Yards since 2012

Ben Crane
6th in Scrambling (2013)

Charley Hoffman
+117 spots in Sand Saves since 2012

Tom Pernice
1st in Putting, 11th in Sand Saves (2013 Champions Tour)

Charlie Wi
3rd in Scrambling (2013)

Jeff Overton
+81 spots in Scrambling since 2011

Kevin Chappell
6th in Sand Saves (2013)

I.K. Kim
17th in Sand Saves, 4th in Putting (2012 LPGA)

Cameron Tringale
16th in Sand Saves (2013)

Other Pro Students (past and present)

Justin Rose
Brad Faxon
Tom Purtzer
Alex Rocha
David Toms
Peter Jacobsen
James Driscoll
Juli Inkster
Tim Herron
Camilo Villegas
Kyle Stanley
Nicholas Thompson
Lexi Thompson
Skip Kendall
Duffy Waldorf
Chris Tidland
Charlie Beljan
Matt Harmon
Jason Knutson
Richard Lee
Steve Lowery
John Rollins
Danielle Kang
Candie Kung
Frank Lickliter
Grant Waite
Joe Durant
Bob Tway
Kevin Stadler
Scott McCarron
Olin Browne
D.J. Trahan
Sang-Moon Bae
Doug Barron
Lee Porter

DIGITAL BONUS
Learn more about James Sieckmann's six wedge secrets at golf.com/instruction and in the tablet editions of Golf Magazine.