

Chapter 1: Where Did the Forty Yards Go?

The drive feels good off the face. The sound is right, and the ball rises into a gray morning. You hold your finish a beat longer than usual. Then you walk off the tee, and you keep walking, and the ball is sitting forty yards short of the old spot.

You know that spot. For twenty years your drives came to rest near the same sprinkler head, the one past the bunker on the right. From there it was a short iron to the green. Now you are standing where your second shot used to land, pulling a hybrid, and one of the fellows in your group is politely looking the other way.

Nobody says anything. That is almost worse.

The drive that lands where your second shot used to

I keep an old shoebox of scorecards in a kitchen drawer, the kind you never throw out. A few winters ago I sorted them by decade, with a cup of coffee going cold beside me. The scores had not changed as much as I feared. The clubs I was hitting into greens had changed completely. The eight-irons had turned into sixes, and the sixes had turned into hybrids.

That is how the loss really shows up. It does not arrive as one bad day. It creeps into your club selection until you forget you ever hit a short iron into the fourteenth.

Most men in your position have a story that explains it. The explanation usually sounds reasonable, and it usually carries a quiet verdict: *this is just what happens now*.

In the Golf Monthly forum, a club golfer described what changed his game. He cut his handicap to 14.5 and shot a best-ever 81 by practicing twice a week with more focus. His explanation surprised the thread. He did not say he got stronger or bought a new driver. He said he saved most of his shots by hitting straighter off the tee and by chipping better.

Case: A club golfer on the Golf Monthly forum dropped to a 14.5 handicap and shot his best-ever 81. He practiced twice a week with more focus. By his own account, most of the saved shots came from straighter tee shots and better chipping, not from new equipment or extra strength.

Look at who that is. He is a mid-handicapper, the same range you play in. His gains came from **how he struck the ball**, and nothing about his birth certificate changed. Keep him in mind while we go through the excuses.

Cold, age, the ball, the back: the usual excuses and what they explain

Every excuse on this list contains some truth. That is why they are so comfortable. The trouble comes when a small truth is asked to explain a big loss.

The cold and the course

Cold mornings, heavy air and soft fairways all shorten a drive. You have felt it in March, and your group has felt it too. But weather changes from day to day. Your lost yards stay with you through July. A seasonal factor cannot explain a loss that never takes a season off.

The ball and the gear

Many golfers go hunting for yards in the pro shop. On the GolfWRX forums, players with a persistent left miss have asked club fitters whether bending their irons flatter would cure it. That discussion shows how often we try an equipment fix for what is usually a face or setup problem. A new driver will not repair a strike that comes in at the wrong angle.

Age

Here is the hard one, and I will not pretend it away. A body in its sixties does not move like a body in its thirties. But the dossier I trust for this book gives me no honest figure for how many yards age alone takes each year. So I will not invent one. What I can show you is how much distance separates golfers of **the same age** who simply swing differently. That gap is large, and none of it depends on birthdays.

The back

Stiff hips and a tight lower back are real. They also cause something more interesting than weakness. They change *the order* in which you move, and order is where speed lives. Research on professional golfers shows that the hips reach peak rotation before the lower spine does. In other words, the lower body starts the downswing (PMC / NCBI). When your hips will not turn, your arms take over the job. Arms that start first are a weak engine.

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A stiff back rarely steals yards directly. It changes the order of your swing, and the order steals the yards.

What you really lost, and why most of it can be recovered

Here is the principle this whole book rests on. I call it **Leaks, Not Losses**.

A *loss* is something age took, and it is gone for good. A *leak* is distance your body still produces but your swing lets escape before it reaches the ball. Most of your missing yards are leaks. Leaks can be plugged.

You still make more speed than your ball shows. Your job is to stop the yards from escaping between your feet and the clubface.

Let me show you how large the leaks can be, using numbers you can check.

Leak one: speed that never reaches the club

TrackMan data shows the average male amateur, at a handicap of about 14.2, swings the driver at about 94 mph. A scratch golfer swings it at about 110 mph (GOLF.com). That is a 16 mph gap.

A common rule of thumb says each extra mile per hour of driver speed is worth about 2.5 yards (GolfLink). Treat it as a rough guide, not a law. Still, run the numbers yourself.

16 mph × 2.5 yards ≈ 40 yards. That is roughly the distance between the average 14-handicap driver swing and a scratch player's, using TrackMan speed averages (GOLF.com) and the common 2.5-yards-per-mph rule of thumb (GolfLink).

Forty yards. It is the same number you have been mourning. I do not expect you to swing like a scratch player at sixty. I show you the gap because it proves how much distance lives in **how** a swing is built, among golfers who all have two arms and a pair of hips.

Average driver clubhead speed by skill level (TrackMan data)



Average driver clubhead speed by skill level (TrackMan data)

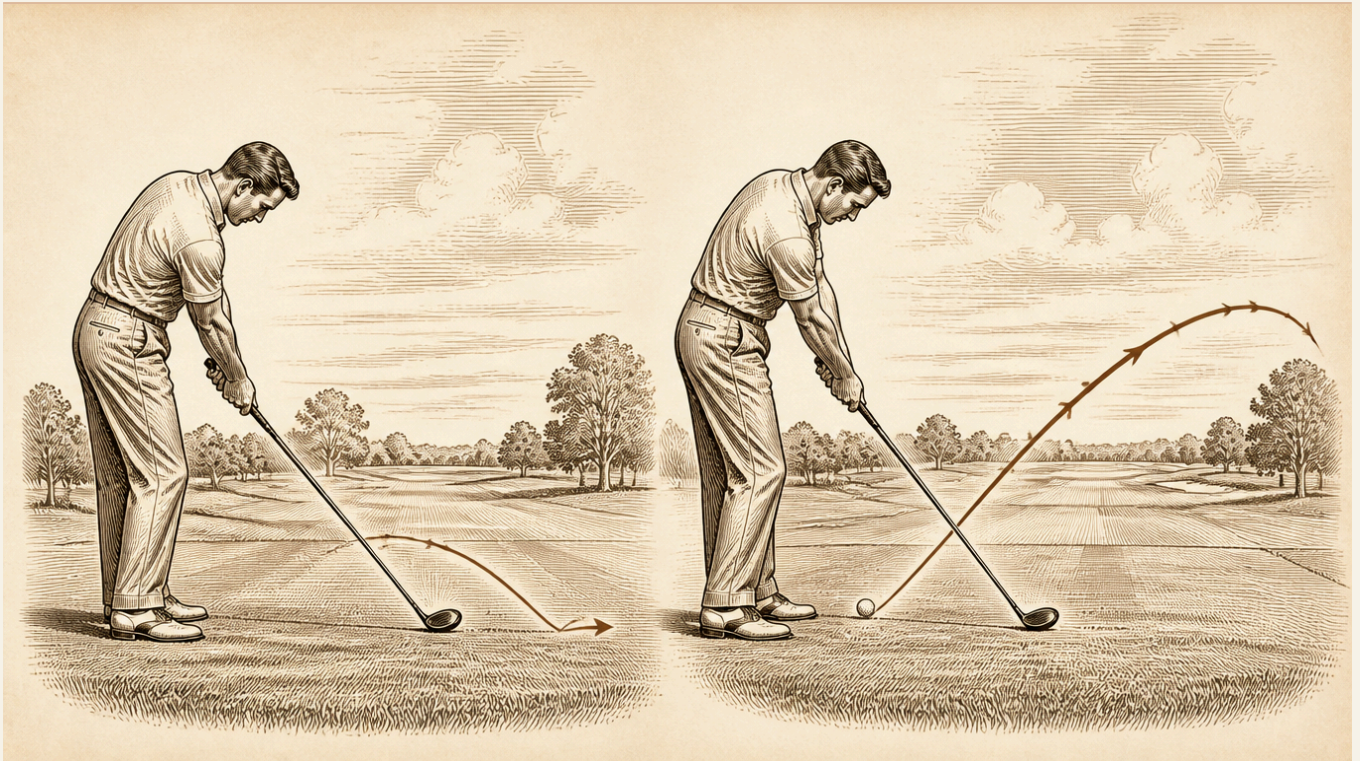
Leak two: the downward strike

This leak costs you yards without any change in effort. According to TrackMan co-founder Fredrik Tuxen, a golfer swinging at 90 mph gains a big advantage by hitting slightly up on the ball. A +5-degree upward attack angle with optimized launch (about 16 degrees of launch and about 2,200 rpm of spin) carries almost 30 yards farther than a -5-degree downward strike. And that gain comes with no increase in swing speed (Titleist Performance Institute).

Many amateurs hit down on the driver. That adds loft and extra spin, and the extra spin costs distance. Sources suggest +2 to +5 degrees as a target range for most recreational players (MyGolfSpy). We will build that upward strike from your setup in Chapters 9 and 10, without asking you to "try" to hit up.

Leak three: tension that slows the club

For decades you were told to keep your left arm ramrod straight. Good players do not do that. A tour player may have roughly 30 degrees of bend in the lead arm at the top and still make an excellent swing (GolfWRX). Instructors agree the straight lead arm matters most at impact, and they note that locking it rigid adds tension that can slow the clubhead (Golf Australia Magazine). If you have been stiffening that arm for twenty years, you have been pressing a brake with every swing. Chapter 11 takes that rule apart.



Your first job: a yardage audit

Before you change a single thing, find out where you are. This needs no range, no swinging and no risk. Just use your memory and a pencil.

- ✓ Write down the club you used to hit into your home course's three longest par-4s. Be honest.
- ✓ Write down the club you hit into those same greens now.
- ✓ Count the clubs of difference. Roughly speaking, each one is a real distance gap you have been living with.
- ✓ Note your usual miss off the tee: slice, pull or short and straight.
- ✓ Circle which excuse you have leaned on most: cold, age, the ball or the back.

Keep that sheet. You will use it in Chapter 25 to measure your progress in yards, contact and misses, and you will want a true starting line.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Stop blaming the calendar for the whole loss.** Weather and equipment explain single days. Your swing explains the years.
- ▶ **Think in leaks, not losses.** Speed that never reaches the club, a downward driver strike and a tense lead arm can each cost you real yards.
- ▶ **Respect the rule-of-thumb math.** About 2.5 yards per mph means even a few mph recovered is worth a club or more on long holes (GolfLink).
- ▶ **Remember that the strike matters as much as the speed.** At 90 mph, hitting up rather than down can mean almost 30 more yards of carry with no extra effort (Titleist Performance Institute).
- ▶ **Complete your yardage audit this week,** before you change anything else.

There is a harder question behind all this. You have already paid for lessons that aimed at these very problems. You have a folder full of tips, some of them expensive and some of them contradictory. So why did none of them stick? And why did every one of them seem to fall apart the moment you stood over the ball on the first tee, with your group watching?