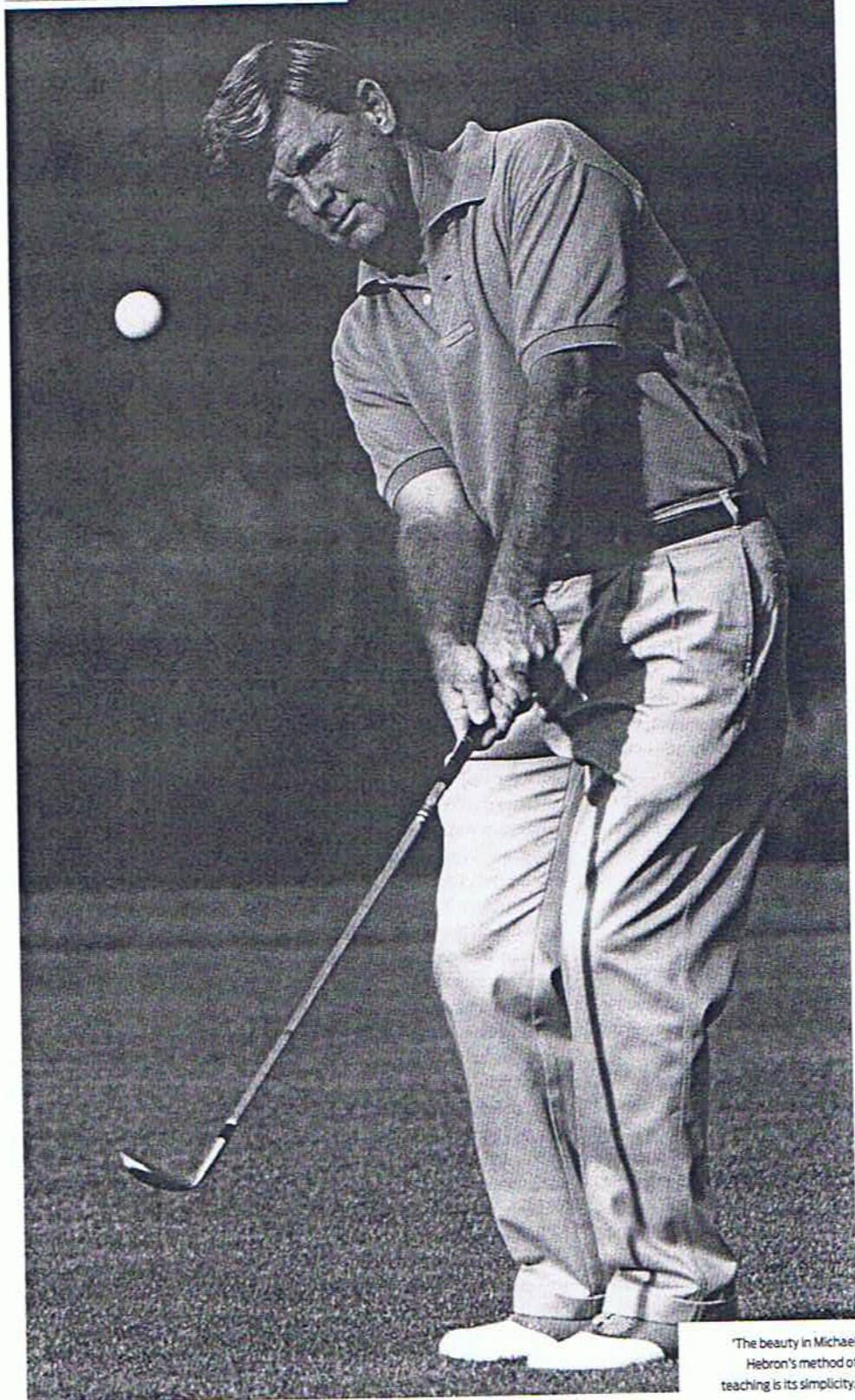


lessons



'The beauty in Michael Hebron's method of teaching is its simplicity.'

FIRST HAND

Michael Hebron is one of America's best known golf teachers. Shalini Malik is among the top women golf professionals in India. The two met up recently when Malik made the trip to see Hebron. She writes about her experience here.

On a recent trip to the U.S. I was fortunate enough to spend some time with Michael Hebron, the well-known teaching professional. Hebron was 19th on Golf Digest's list of top 50 golf teachers in America last year and he has won numerous awards and accolades for his work, including PGA Master Professional and PGA Teacher of the Year. Hebron was the main force behind the very first PGA teaching and coaching seminar, and is known as the 'Teacher of teachers'.

Hebron's academy—the Michael Hebron School of Learning Golf—is based in Smithtown, Long Island, approximately 50 miles from New York City. He spends the summer there and winters in Florida. I'd heard

about Hebron through a fortuitous conversation I had with my fellow professional Vandana Agarwal while sitting in the Delhi Golf Club annexe. She said she'd gone to see him years ago, and that if I was going to be in New York and was interested in learning about teaching, I must go see him too.

So I landed up in Smithtown and Hebron graciously allowed me to watch him teach his Friday workshop for players of varying abilities. Waking at dawn (those who know me can appreciate how tough that is for me!), I took the train from Penn Station in Manhattan and two hours later was sitting in Hebron's Porsche (he's a car enthusiast) listening to this soft-spoken, sandy-haired gentleman with Irish blue eyes that twinkled with curiosity, as he explained his ideas on golf and learning.

Hebron had arrived at his method of teaching through an enormous amount of research on the way the human brain works, and how it actually learns. He had been teaching for 15 years and coaches like Hank Haney (Tiger Woods' current guru) said that no one knew more about the golf swing than Hebron, when he realized that his way of teaching wasn't getting through to everyone. His students weren't improving at the rate they should have been. He then decided to go out and learn as much as he could about teaching methods, and how to improve them.

The conclusions he arrived at are fascinating, and utterly

simple: Create a positive learning environment; allow students to arrive at their own conclusions through self discovery; play to learn and not learn to play; do not strive for an ideal swing but have the freedom and the knowledge to be creative with what you already have; stop looking at errors as negative and start treating them as feedback; and, most importantly, have fun with the game. In a nutshell, play it in the truest sense of the word.

I watched as Hebron explained these concepts in detail to club golfers. Amongst them was a lady who'd never played golf before. To see her go from not knowing which way the clubhead should face to hitting the ball like an 18-handicapper in a few hours made me realize how little I knew about the game. And also how wonderful it could be if taught in the correct way. Hebron managed to make her understand what we consider complicated theories and aspects of the golf swing. She grasped the swing plane and spine angle, and other seemingly esoteric concepts, with no difficulty. The beauty in his method of teaching is its utmost simplicity.

The next time I went to see Hebron was near the end of my trip. I wanted him to have a look at my swing and I was also keen to observe him again as he taught. He watched me, heard me and helped me in the simplest possible way. And he allowed me to watch as he went about performing his magic with other students.

Before driving me to the station for my train back to New York, he asked if I would like to see the library in his house. Of course, I would! After a little detour, where he showed me what his 1968 Ford Mustang could do on narrow country roads, I walked down the stairs into his basement and stepped into history.

Three of the four walls were lined with bookshelves. He had issues of the American Golfer magazine dating back to the very first one in 1908. Tucked away, in one corner, was the first edition copy of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Abutting it was a book by Albert Einstein (signed by him). There was also a first edition signed copy (dedicated to Hebron) of Ben Hogan's *Five Lessons: The Modern Fundamentals of Golf*. There were books on teaching, books on learning, books on golf dating back to the early 19th century, even some random novels here and there. To a bibliophile like me, that basement was nothing short of heaven.

But it was the golf memorabilia, strewn about, that made the room truly special. There was a little collection of golf balls that tracked their evolution, starting from the feathery balls to the ones we use today. There were clubs from the early 1700s hanging on Hebron's walls. There were photos of the greats—Vardon, Jones, Hogan, Nicklaus, Palmer, Player... just about everyone you could think of (most of them signed by the players themselves). But the room's

pièce de résistance had to be Ben Hogan's golf bag from the 1967 Ryder Cup, the year he captained the U.S. side and the year the Americans thrashed Great Britain 23½-8½. At a dinner held on the eve of one of the matches, Hogan waited as the Great Britain team was given a long-winded introduction by their captain, Dai Rees. He then stood up, named each of his players and simply said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the United States Ryder Cup team, the finest golfers in the world." The royal blue leather bag sat smack in the middle of the room and contained a driver Hogan actually used. Hebron pulled out the driver and let me hold it. I got goose bumps!

Hebron belongs to a rare breed of gentlemen, generous with their time and knowledge. And his knowledge is vast. For me personally, it was a journey well worth making and I hope I get to see him again soon. ■



BY SHALINI MALIK
(An accomplished amateur, the author now competes on the DLF Women's Professional Golf Tour. Her home course is the Delhi Golf Club.)