

Instructors get to the core of golf swing

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Golfer Kota Kojima gets instruction on core breathing techniques to improve his swing from Scott Bartley (left) and Bill Westerlund at the Mission Bay Golf Course driving range.

[Ben Hogan](#) collaborated with [Sports Illustrated](#) in 1957 for a series that detailed perhaps the purest golf swing of all time. The articles and drawings would become an instructional bible for the sport, "Five Lessons: The Modern Fundamentals of Golf."

Old Ben was ahead of his time.

In the book, there is an image of Hogan swinging, with the illustration of a motor imposed over his midsection. Hogan didn't call it his "core," but he was making his point: The area was the engine of the swing.

These days, it's all about the power of the core in many sports, and a couple of San Diegans are taking core issues to another level in an attempt to revolutionize how golf is taught and played.

Bill Westerlund, a 40-year [PGA](#) instructor, and Scott Bartley, a 30-year practitioner of the Chinese discipline of Qigong, are working together at the Mission Bay Golf Course on a program they call "The Power of Core-Breathing 4 Golf: Mind, Body, Breath."

The goal is to mesh the benefits of the deep, mindful breathing practiced in martial arts with an awareness of golf fundamentals that are tied to the body's core. "Mind" refers to removing emotional thoughts that hinder energy flow; "body" is learning to maximize the use of core energy for peak performance; "breath" is learning a process to make a mind-body connection through core breathing.

"You've watched the movie 'Rain Man?' Westerlund asked on a recent morning on the Mission Bay driving range. "Well, he (Bartley) is my [Dustin Hoffman](#). He's out there, and this is, like, out there."

Out there, yes, but Westerlund and Bartley speak passionately about their approach, and it's clear they believe in its benefits.

"No one is doing this but us, and we feel we've got a winner," Westerlund said. "Our goal is to change the way golf is taught, the way the game is played, and the way it's viewed by announcers."

Westerlund, 58, and Bartley, 63, met three years ago when Bartley signed up for a lesson. A Qigong master, Bartley told the instructor about his decades of martial arts training and demonstrated the remarkable strength he can muster when he focuses on core breathing.

On the driving range, the tall and lean Bartley showed a reporter how he can pull a man to the ground with one arm.

"My perspective is how the mind and body connect through energy," Bartley said. "You can eat energy with emotions or you can direct energy. The more you think, the less you feel; the more you feel, the more you can do physically."

Westerlund, who was the director of instruction at La Costa for 16 years, said he watches televised golf on the weekends and can often predict when a player is going to hit a bad shot under pressure. The red flag comes in the shoulders, which can take on all of the body's tension, especially when a golfer is so nervous he or she is almost literally gulping for air.

With the player's energy directed to the upper body, control of the core and legs is lost, and the swing goes haywire. Westerlund used the example of LPGA star [Cristie Kerr](#) dunking her approach shot into the water on the 72nd hole last month while losing a tournament in [Oregon](#).

"She explained what happened by saying her backswing gets short sometimes," Westerlund said. "If there's tension up here (in the shoulders), how long can the swing be? She understands the effect, but not the cause. We could train her tomorrow and get her better."

Bartley explains that relaxing the shoulders is a function of core breathing. "If I can teach you to exhale for 30 seconds to a minute, how tight can your shoulders be?" he said.

He teaches students to breathe deeply into the lower abdomen and then tighten muscles in the core. Breath and energy are released in the latter portion of the swing.

The instructors also emphasize the role of the ankles, feet and toes in the swing, saying they play a dynamic part in directing energy.

"The ball is on the ground, and if the energy is in the shoulders that doesn't work," Westerlund said.

Grant Creighton, a 27-year-old San Diegan who is playing professionally on mini-tours, has been using core breathing techniques for a couple of years and said, "It really frees you up to swing the club. The energy is directed in the right way."

Creighton said his mental approach also has been boosted by the approach.

"In golf you have a lot of time between shots; there's a lot of stuff that can go on mentally that can be detrimental. I've found that if I focus on my breathing, focus on my core, it allows me to keep my mind clear."

The techniques take effort to learn, Creighton said, and aren't for those hoping for a quick fix.

Said Westerlund, "Do you want to take the time to learn it and get better, or do you not?"

Westerlund's fee is \$100 per hour and Bartley charges \$30 per hour. More information can be found on their websites, [pgainstructor.com](#) and [bartleyenergycoach.com](#).

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