

PROPONENT SUMMER BOOK SERIES CONTINUES:

## LYNN AND PIA TAKE IT ONTO THE COURSE WITH “BE A PLAYER”

*On the bookshelf of any devoted golf coach one is likely to find the writings of Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott, Scottsdale-based Proponent Group members whose company and teaching brand is VISION54. In previous works such as Every Shot Must Have Purpose, The Game Before the Game and Play Your Best Golf Now, Lynn and Pia have skillfully introduced the elements of their teaching: Shotmaking with purpose and commitment, practice that reflects the real game, and skills that enable golfers to access physical, mental, and emotional states that lead to better play.*

*In their new book from Atria the VISION54 duo starts from the premise that the true place of improvement is on the golf course. Likewise, the vital (internal) resource for making improvement happen is a set of “human skills” that every player must rely on “in the actual context of the game.”*

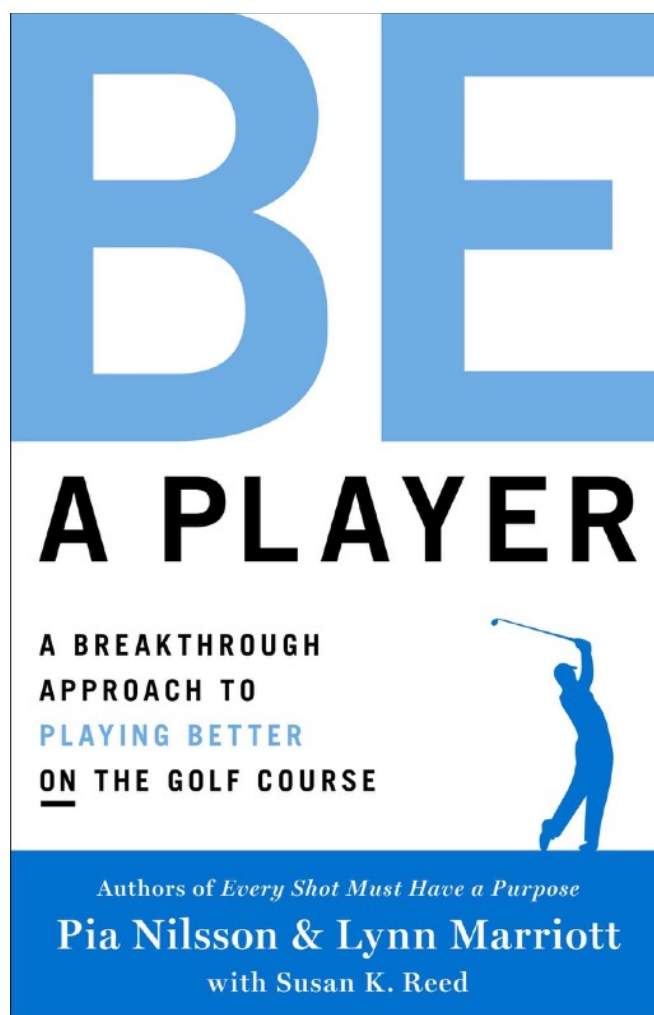
*Here’s an excerpt from “Be a Player: A Breakthrough Approach to Playing Better on the Golf Course,” by Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott, with Susan K. Reed. It’s currently available for online ordering at Amazon.com.*

Even as club technology, fitness training and the science of the swing have improved exponentially over the past decade, many golfers have not improved and have been leaving the game. The numbers have declined for several reasons, from a shortage of playing time and budget considerations, to difficulty in learning the game and courses that are too challenging.

Many golfers struggle to transfer their games from the range to the course. We see players making good contact in practice, but when we’re watching them on the course, they take three times longer to hit the ball—with a completely different technical swing. All of a sudden, they can’t hit the ball. Their physical, mental, and emotional states have changed because performing on the golf course means something. There are actual consequences to what they do.

Consider this: What if you arrive at a tennis court or a basketball court and see a sign that reads: NO PRACTICING ON THE COURT. Or at a swimming pool, the lifeguard tells you, “Sorry, no practicing your breast stroke in the pool.” Many golf courses and clubs have similar rules, ostensibly to protect pace of play and the conditions of the course. Here’s what we believe: Practicing golf shots

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and playing golf on the course are not incompatible. To learn a sport, you need to learn in the context of the sport with all its constraints. Only in this state can you learn the skills that are required in the real environment of the game.

In addition to teaching the mechanics of a pitch shot on the range, golfers need to learn to hit that shot on the course, and then how to hit it a little higher to get over a bunker or a bush (and with only one try!). Let’s say there’s a tree in front of you.

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You need to get the ball around the tree. The first time you try, you'll probably stick the ball in the trunk of the tree. But with exploration and practice, you'll figure out how to navigate around the tree. All of a sudden, you've learned to curve the ball. You've learned to play.

The bottom line is that you have to be in the pool to learn how to swim, you have to be on a tennis court to learn to play tennis, and you have to be on the golf course to learn the game. You need to dedicate time on the course when you're not focused on keeping score. You need to be on the course to discover what works. (And we promise, doing so will not hold up play or leave hundreds of divots.) Only on the course will you truly develop your skills, your game—and yourself.

A related issue we've observed is that when golfers (of any level) struggle on the course, they tend to blame their technique. Players today have become entirely too focused on the swing, with its angles and planes, speeds and smash factors. Amateur golfers are convinced they'll shoot lower scores once they've figured out whether they're one-plane or two-plane swingers. They debate swing theories—X-factor, Stack-and-Tilt, A-Swing—as if one is the right answer. As one of our students put it, "I've taken in so much information, I feel like my head is exploding."

We want to make it clear that we're not dismissing the benefit of modern technology or the importance of a sound golf swing. It's imperative that you have a reliable swing that fits your body. You need to practice it enough, so you are confident and can execute it proficiently. You also need to know which situations call for a certain shot. Even so, we believe there's an important distinction. It's not just about the swing. It's about the golfer who makes the swing on the course.

There's a book we like called *The Dude and the Zen Master*. It's a series of conversations between the actor Jeff Bridges and a Zen master named Bernie Glassman. In the book, Bernie and Jeff discuss a variety of subjects, from movies to family to learning to, well, simply, being human. Bernie tells Jeff that he knows a little ditty that contains one of the secrets to life:

*Row, row, row your boat,  
Gently down the stream,  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, Life is but a dream.*

He asks Jeff to imagine getting into a boat for the first time and trying to figure out how to row. Should he put the right oar into the water first or the left? What should he be doing with his shoulders during the stroke? What about his arms? What if he wants to row to the opposite shore? If he fixates on the destination, he might forget to pay attention to his rowing mechanics. But if he fixates on his rowing, he could lose focus on where he wants to go.

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Bernie explains that, according to Zen philosophy, the opposite shore is actually right under your feet. So the question isn't, How do you get from here to there? The question is, How do you get from here to here? How do you become fully present in the moment, in your environment, and in the activity in which you're engaged?

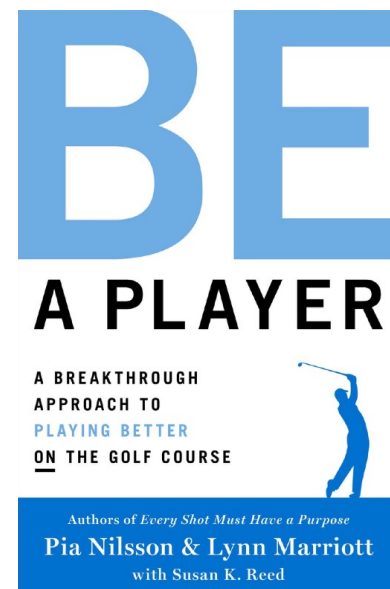
Bernie advises Jeff, "Don't get down on yourself because you're not an expert rower right away. Don't go learn to row in a performance tank. Just ease your boat into the water and begin to row—very gently—down the stream."

In our previous books, we introduced the elements of our teaching: Shotmaking with purpose and commitment, practice that reflects the real game, and skills that enable you to access physical, mental, and emotional states that lead to better play. But we believe the place you can really improve your game is on the golf course, so in this book, we'll teach you what we call "human skills," which you'll rely on in the actual context of the game. As you learn these skills, you will learn more about yourself. You will be able to rely on yourself. You will be able to adjust. You will become your own best coach. Which means, you'll be a player.

In our opinion, there are four pillars that support a golfer's game: 1) your fitness level, 2) your technical skills (that is, your swing and stroke), 3) your equipment, and 4) your human skills. Unfortunately, the human skills are rarely taught—and to us, these are essential to playing good golf.

We look at it this way: Once you step onto the golf course, can you change your fitness level, your technical skills, or your equipment? No. The only one of these pillars you have control over on the course is your human skills. Developing these skills—especially self-awareness and self-management—will help you play your best. Human skills will also help you manage emotions that invariably arise on the course, such as anxiety, frustration, fear, discouragement, and anger. They

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can also help you create positive states such as focus, confidence, equanimity, courage, and joy—all of which help you enjoy the game more.

During our collective 64 years of teaching and coaching, we've become super-interested in the conditions that facilitate peak performance—that is, when people are performing at the highest level of their abilities. Whether the performers are dancers, musicians, surgeons, or golfers, one common denominator is that, in the moment of performance, they are fully present through their senses—particularly sight, sound, and feel. When this happens, we are capable of far more than we've ever imagined.

It's why we named our company VISION54. We wanted to invoke a new frontier, the idea that a golfer will shoot a score of 54 someday. That could mean making birdies on all 18 holes, or a combination of pars, birdies, and eagles. 54 is a number. It's also a philosophy oriented toward possibilities rather than limitations. 54 is a process of changing old habits and learning new ones. It's a discipline of managing your physical, mental, and emotional states on a golf course—in an environment that's always changing.

We have full confidence that a golfer will shoot 54 someday soon: To date, fewer than 20 players have carded a 59 in competition. One of the 59-shooters, Annika Sorenstam, was coached by Pia. Another, Russell Knox, is a PGA Tour professional we currently coach. So, what will it take to open the door to the next performance breakthrough in golf? In our opinion, shooting 54 will require a paradigm shift from a “faults-and-fixes” approach to a “possibilities-and-excellence” approach that will additionally rely on human skills.

We think of this as a back-to-the-future concept. When the Society of St. Andrews Golfers was founded in 1754, there were no professional instructors, no practice ranges, and no swing simulators. Golfers learned to play on the course, in the context of the game. They figured out how to properly flight a shot, manage their nerves, and focus on the parts of the game they could control. Throughout history, great champions have embodied these skills: Old Tom Morris, Joyce Wethered, Bobby Jones, Ben Hogan, Nancy Lopez, Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, and Annika Sorenstam used their human skills to become great players of the game. It's our opinion that these skills don't have to remain implicit, or mysterious, or the province of champions. Today, thanks to advances in science and performance research, and our years of observing and coaching golfers, we can help make implicit skills explicit.

Recent research in fields such as psychophysiology, neuroscience, and athletic training have changed the way we think about how we learn,

what our true capacities are, and what creates peak performance. These fields incorporate medicine, psychology, physiology, brain science, nutrition, biofeedback, contextual learning, and meditation. They propose that we have a capacity to learn and perform at a higher level than most had ever imagined, enabling us to bridge the long-assumed mind/body divide. This allows us to consider golf in a new light, because it points directly to us; we are capable of more improvement, growth, and self-regulation than we thought possible. However, the work of crossing this mind/body divide, and attaining these larger goals, is up to each of us.

We're not alone in discovering a new, forward-thinking philosophy. Many of our peers in golf and other sports are just as committed to these new ideas. In this book, we want to introduce some of the people and concepts that have influenced us over the years—innovative teachers like Chuck Hogan and Kjell Enhager; human-potential thinkers such as Michael Murphy and Ken Wilber; scientists and psychologists the likes of JoAnne Whitaker and Carol Dweck; techniques like Heart-Math, and even an approach to communication and personal growth called Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

This journey will be interior (you, the human being) and exterior (you on the golf course). Our goal is to introduce you to the human skills in context, and help you understand how to use them. Each chapter includes Questions and On-Course Explorations. The explorations should always be done on the course. The purpose is to spur you to reflect and become more aware, so you can discover what makes you play your best. We want you to blend the explorations into your rounds—the more you use them, the more natural and organic they'll become.

And the more they'll change your game. We hope you'll engage them with three words we cherish: awareness, intention, and attention. Instead of beating balls to death on the range, we hope you'll make these human skills the heart of your game.

Come with us. Let's explore golf in a whole new way. **PG**

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