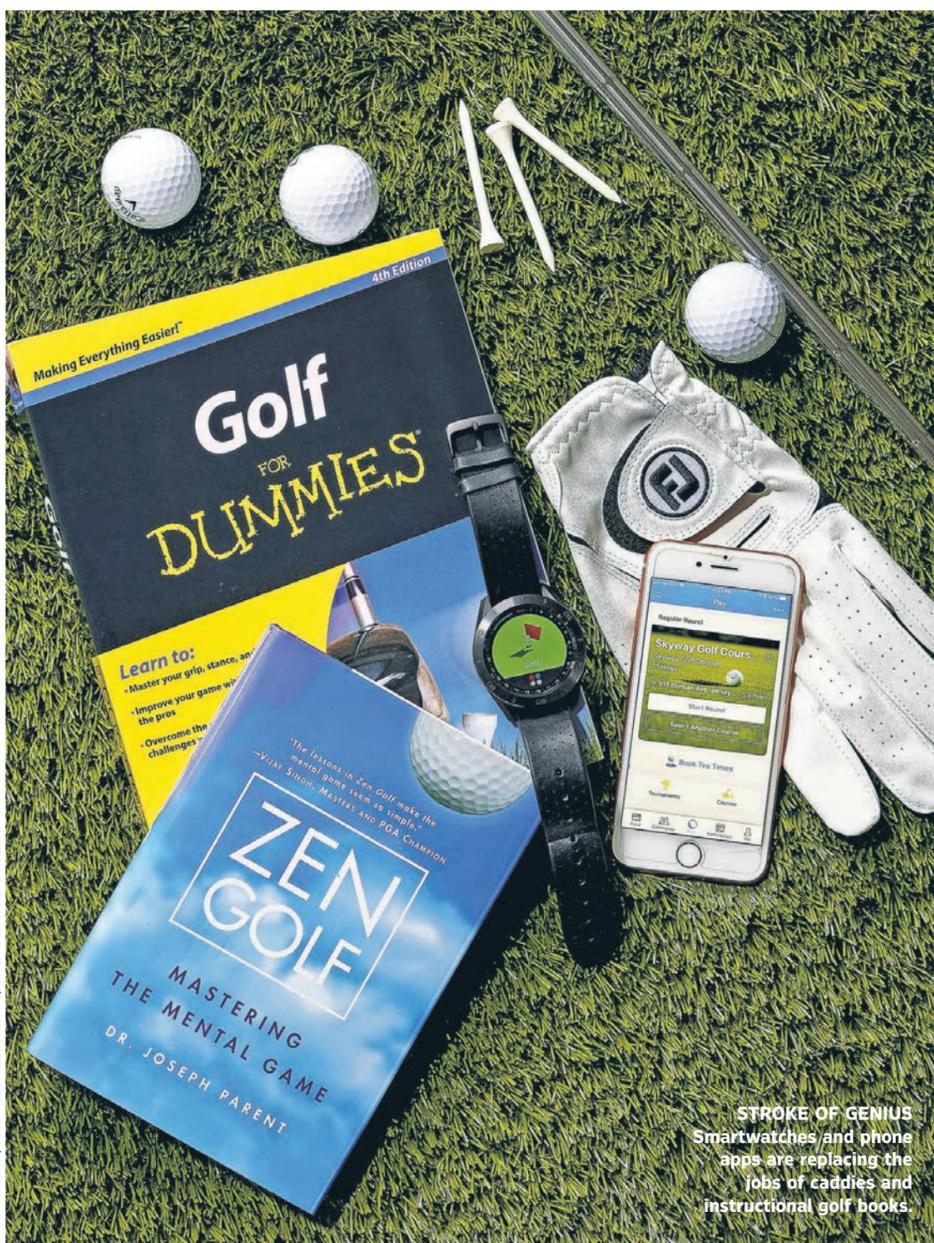


GEAR & GADGETS



F. MARTIN RAMWIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

STROKE OF GENIUS
Smartwatches and phone apps are replacing the jobs of caddies and instructional golf books.

Greener Pastures

Can fancy new tech fix your golf swing? One novice finds out

By DAVID PIERCE

IN THE LAST FEW years, everything from motion sensors to GPS trackers have become inexpensive and small enough to make their way into your golf bag. The upshot: It's easier than ever to collect data about your game. What to do with that data can be a bit trickier.

I've been playing golf for years, both because I love the game and because I enjoy an excuse to drink beer outdoors for four hours. As for my skill level, I'm where most casual golfers are: I can name all the clubs in my bag and play without embarrassing myself too badly, but the old "grip it and rip it" method will never be enough to fill the giant holes in my game.

Right now, two kinds of gadgets

aim to lower your scores—call them Trackers and Caddies. The Trackers are like Fitbits for your club. Some are soda-cap-size discs that screw into the top of your shaft or silicon sleeves that slide on tight. Others are built into smartwatches or even your glove. Each typically uses built-in sensors to tell you how fast you're swinging the club, and marks each new location to figure out how far you slugged that last shot. With a Blast Motion sensor attached to my pitching wedge's shaft, I discovered that the ball I hit with the club traveled nowhere near as far as I'd thought. Heartbreaking. The sensors delivered similarly crushing news about my strokes using the other clubs, too.

Once I could more accurately gauge the yardage I could achieve with each club I stopped guessing

which one to grab and started strategizing my way to the hole. Knowing I was 138 yards from the pin (thanks to my handy GPS-enabled range finder), I decided to swap my 7-iron for an 8 and let 'er rip.

The Caddies, meanwhile, are smartphone apps that help simplify those decisions, often advising how to attack each shot. Tell the 18Birdies app that you hit a driver 220 yards and a 3-iron 185 yards, and it'll recommend which club to pull out as you approach the tee or try to make the green in two (the app has data on 35,000 courses). It takes into account real-time wind and elevation conditions and even tells you how hard to swing the club. (I have no idea how to use exactly 89% of my full strength swinging a 9-iron, but I can try.)

The Arccos Caddie app can do

even more. It connects via Bluetooth to nickel-size devices that attach to any club, or to Cobra Golf's new F8 connect clubs (see "In the Swing of Things"). After you play a few rounds, the Arccos app might learn that you tend to slice your driver and recommend you play a 5-iron on narrow holes instead of trying to compensate by aiming at the woods on the left.

These Trackers and Caddies are designed to help you play smarter within your skill set, which is great, but I still had questions about how to improve my swing: Am I gripping the club right? How should I set my feet? What's that flop shot thing Phil Mickelson does with his wedge? I had a bunch of club yardages and swing speeds at my disposal, but without expensive lessons or a high-tech simulator with a virtual coach judging my motions, how was I supposed to improve?

So far, the best tool I've found for developing a better swing is my smartphone's camera. Propping my phone against an empty bucket of range balls, I can record video of my backswing and follow through using the Blast Vision app from Blast Motion. After a few cuts with

Once I could better gauge my yardage with each club, I stopped guessing which one to grab and started strategizing.

my driver, I was able to watch slow-motion replays demonstrating how I went up on my toes or swung so hard I practically threw the club, and pair that knowledge with the sensor data to start fixing my form.

Garmin's Approach S60 Smartwatch, specifically a feature called Swing Tempo, helped keep me in bounds by tracking the pace of every swing. My speedy strokes had caused me to spray the ball all over the course until the app coached me into grasping that the ideal ratio of backswing time to downswing time was 3:1. After an hour of practice, I started to learn what that felt like. My game immediately improved.

All this new tech will require a little leeway from the U.S. Golf Association, which governs the rulebook that pros and amateurs play by. Section 14-3 states that players cannot use devices "that might assist a player in making a specific stroke or generally in his play," so there's still a long way to go before golf becomes a truly high-tech sport. I'm not trying to make the PGA Tour, though, just trying to keep my drives out of the woods and my scores south of triple digits.

Over weeks, I became a notably better golfer, in part because these gadgets forced me to think before every shot. I learned to swing a little slower, choose the right club more often and stop doing that weird twisty thing with my knees. Now if only I could get some giant headgear contraption that would prevent my head from popping up a split-second before I hit the ball, I'd practically be a pro.

IN THE SWING OF THINGS / HIGH-TECH GOLF GEAR



18BIRDIES

Use the app to find training videos and drill ideas. Once on the course, it can tell you how far you hit each club and make caddie-like recommendations for every shot. It can even help find you tee times and a new golf buddy. *Free, upgrades for \$5/mo., 18birdies.com*



BLAST MOTION

Pop the Blast Motion sensor onto your club, set your smartphone to video mode, and you've got your very own video training device. The Blast Vision app also tracks the exit velocity and estimated distance of each shot, and offers a library of drills. *\$150, blastmotion.com*



GARMIN APPROACH S60

This GPS-enabled smartwatch tracks your swings through companion sensors and provides real-time advice on what kind of shot to hit next. Take it to the range and use Garmin's Swing Tempo and TruSwing apps to perfect your swing. *\$400, garmin.com*



COBRA CONNECT CLUBS

Going for the green? A built-in tracking system in each Cobra connected club helps you dial in how far you can whack the ball and an app assists in club selection for each shot. *From \$699, cobragolf.com*

MY TECH ESSENTIALS

Rachael Ray

Celebrity chef and host of her eponymous show, returning Sept. 10, on her obsessions with hard rock, roller disco and murder



The most important things in my life are my notebooks. Every book I've written, every recipe for a show, everything I cook for friends and family, I record in **composition books**. Sometimes I concept the way I want something to look and I doodle it. My brain can free-flow better if I have a pen in my hand.



I was a big roller-skating disco girl when I was growing up. I still love **roller skates**—the old-timey ones, not the in-line skates. I'm 50 now, and our last big company party was at the roller rink.



In the gym or when I run, I listen to drum-driven, very heavy rock like Led Zeppelin or The Who. So I wear **Shure SE535** high-definition sound isolating earphones. They're made to fit snugly inside my ears without moving around. I sweat a lot, so after a 30-minute run, I am doused. If I use any of those funny little bud things, they get washed out from the sweat and simply fall out of my head.

My husband gave me a beautiful set of **Paul Cox knives**. They have black diamonds in the handles and they look like you're gonna murder someone. They're pretty cool (similar model shown).



I love murder. Period. I binge-watch "**Columbo**" on Hallmark. I love Peter Falk and I've seen every episode a million times. Sometimes it's on all day—but I do have to do other things while it's on. *—Edited from an interview by Chris Kornelis*



We have literally thousands of records that we buy at Amoeba Music or find at flea markets, so it makes sense that the most expensive thing in our apartment is our record player: an **AVID Acutus SP Turntable**. The deck literally floats, so if there's an imperfection or a scratch on the album, it compensates for it.



GETTY IMAGES (NOTEBOOK); ALAMY (COLUMBO); MOXIE SKATES (SKATES)