



How much can a 25-handicap hacker improve if he quits work and takes up a professional golf lifestyle for 18 months? Golf writer **Richard Asher** did the hard yards, and walked away with a green jacket...

What's the best job in the world? If you're reading this magazine, chances are 'professional golfer' is up there on your list. Huge money to travel the world and play the game you love. And you never have to sit at a desk. Best job going.

But it's a damn difficult business to get into. To be a tour pro, you need such superhuman skill that nearly all of us – even some of the scratch players at your club – write off our chances without even trying.

But I've never been one to just accept a mediocre existence. Is golf all about talent, or can hard work make the difference? One must at least try some serious practice before saying one cannot be a professional golfer. Otherwise, how do you really know?

GETTING SET UP

I wanted to play or practice golf six days a week. Working was not an option! Unemployment was easy to arrange: my company went under. Forced into a change, I decided to give freelance writing a try. I'd probably never have been brave enough to do it unprovoked – sometimes you need a door to close. This was my chance to work my own hours – and spend whole days golfing.

To drum up publicity, I started a website with a Masters twist. I labelled my campaign My Green Jacket. A Hacker's Quest to Play at the Masters. And thanks to a visit to the second-hand shop at Cape Town High School, I created a special (if rather too tight on the arms) green jacket of my own. Cue

many a double-take at Checkers!

I joined Westlake Golf Club, because despite the entry fee it was the best deal for my purposes. Golf was unlimited and paid upfront – I was going to get my money's worth! And it was just up the road from my hovel. (Be warned: you have to live in a hovel if you choose golf over work.)

I arranged a set of Tom Wishon irons, plus rescue and driver, from Golf Science in Cape Town. I was thoroughly measured up (and down) for a custom fit, and the clubs felt as good as anything I'd ever tried before. They would get quite a workout!

It was September 2009 and I didn't even have an official handicap. Undaunted, I set myself the completely arbitrary deadline

of reaching scratch by the end of April 2011: 19 months. I set the clock ticking on my website.

I was good to go.

BREAKING 90

My first outing, on a peach of an evening at Westlake, was as disastrous as Friday afternoon nine-holers I'd played at high school. High fifties. My first 18-hole round was well in excess of 100. My first handicap came out at 25. Pretty much what I'd expected after my hitherto intermittent attempts at golf.

I liked the idea of having lessons, but I didn't have the money. Come December, I'd lumbered down to a 22 and was getting nowhere but the mid-90s. I had to make a plan for coaching. So I drove to Pearl Valley and chatted with globetrotting tour coach Jamie Gough at that year's SA Open. Jamie liked my plan, and talked to his award-winning colleague Wayne Bradley. Wayne kindly agreed to keep an eye on me at the Jamie Gough Golf School in Cape Town. No excuses there, then.

At the end of January 2010 I visited Phakalane in Botswana, and unexpectedly broke 90 with a medal 87 on a course I'd never seen before. It was such an isolated incident, though, that I almost



During good spells, Richard was deadly with the putter, but unfortunately these were few and far between.

MY TOP TIPS

- I left the lessons too long – I wasted the first five months. The sooner you get coaching, the better. Get into the right habits before you get into the wrong ones. Practising the wrong things for hours is worse than not practising at all.
- Be sceptical of 'you drive for show, you putt for dough.' It may be so for pros, but it's not that clear-cut for an average amateur. It's no good putting (or chipping) well if you hack five shots through the trees before getting near the green. Driving far and straight is not vital, but controlling your iron shots usually is.
- Confidence has an extraordinary influence on putting. I only

got this right in very short bursts, but if you can develop a firm belief that it's going in, you will hole dozens more putts.

■ You never know when golf will reward you. You might spend 12 hours on the range and then shoot your worst round in a year the next day. Don't expect a direct correlation between practice and scores. Just hang in there.

■ People say golf is mostly mental, but when it comes to the long game that's just an excuse not to practise. Sure, it is important to be thinking confident, clear thoughts over the ball, and worth practising this like anything else. But you need to groove a swing.

forgot about it afterwards. It was July before I hit the 80s again.

I'd stalled horribly for six months. From February to July I was stuck on a handicap of 21. Hours of range work, trying everything I could think of to clear those hips and swing properly, did me no good. Big slices. Massive hooks. Long bouts of shanking. I was convinced my short game was reasonable, but my swing was a joke. Scratch was looking a long way off. So too single figures.

BREAKING 80

Suddenly the handicap began to get moving. I improved my mental approach, working hard to develop confidence that I really couldn't justify given my form on the range. It helped. So did a new TaylorMade Burner 3-wood. The

inevitable honeymoon period with this forgiving club gave me a (temporarily) accurate option off the tee and really helped my scoring in the final quarter of 2010.

By August I was an 18, and by the end of the year I'd hit 14. This wasn't due to one or two exceptional scores. I was genuinely improving my overall form and starting to shoot scores under 85.

Still, it was all happening rather too late. I shifted my realistic focus from scratch to single figures. And to break 80. That would still be a worthy achievement.

All I needed for a round in the 70s was a good day without silly mistakes, and one morning in early March, two months before the end of my quest, it all came together. At that stage of the journey my personal medal best was

83 – four hours later it was 77!

A stunning high. I even broke my budget to buy a round for the fourball. I had to lie down when I got home. I hadn't scraped a 79, I'd shattered my best by six shots! I shot a 78 the following week, and I hit 11.

THE LAST DAYS

Consistent scoring throughout March saw me cut to a 10 at the start of April. I had a month to shave off just one more shot and join the pantheon of single-digit players! Surely it had to be?

Surely not. Tempt this game by expecting a fairytale, and it will pummel you. I cut back range time and gave myself game time. thirteen rounds in the last 14 days of April. I just needed another nine or 10 differential. It would not come. My putter abandoned me at the last. There were close calls, ifs and

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but aplenty, but it did not come. At the death, I drifted out to 11.

REFLECTIONS

I took the bitter final twist hard. I deserved better. People said 'you've done well', but only I knew just how much I'd put in. The only one on the range in icy Cape Town rain. Chipping countless balls into a tog bag in my hovel, often missing and having the ball end up in the shower. Putting practice on the Westlake green at night, with only the (now deceased) club cat, Divot, for company. Mixing brandy and Coke every day trying to make myself more Afrikaans (how many of our recent Major winners have been English?). Working on my laptop at midnight because I'd been golfing all day. It wasn't a holiday. I deserved more.

But I'll say this much. Before I thought up this quest, it was inconceivable that I could ever break 80 or be a 10 handicap. Less than a year ago I'd dance a jig to break 90 – now even my most diabolical day is still in the 80s. That is something. My efforts took me well beyond what I thought were my capabilities.

But after 250 rounds? And weeks on the range, with top-drawer coaching? All that visualisation? Yes, I improved a lot. But then you meet some boytjie who never practises and slams it around to a score in the mid-70s once a week. That is called sporting ability. Talent. You need that stuff.

And that's where I really start to feel ill. Because if I had ability like that and worked as hard as I did, I'd be in plus figures by now. More than the pain of not having such talent myself, it sickens me that guys like that are busy drinking and studying marketing rather than building on their gift. I wish we could swap.

What now? It's hard to let go. Golf always seduces you with promises of better times to come. But if we look at my improvement curve, it looks safe to say it might take several more years to reach scratch. I don't say I could never be a professional golfer, but it seems likely I'd need 100 years of hard work to get there. I won't live that long. But I won't die wondering. **CG**

For loads more on my story, or to make further comments, visit www.mygreenjacket.com

THANKS TO

- Wayne Bradley, Jamie Gough and the crew at the Jamie Gough Golf School in Wynberg.
- Ernie Els, Nick Watney, Robert Allenby, Tim Clark and Darren Clarke for their advice and opinions.
- TaylorMade
- Golf Science
- The clubs that gave me free rounds.
- My many, many playing partners. Except the old geezer who was so unpleasant that we walked off after four holes.



A lack of accuracy off the tee meant that Richard struggled to shoot low scores.