



Golf Training Secrets of Michelle Wie and Michael Campbell

Paul Gagné is taking golf conditioning to a new level

by Kim Goss

Michelle Wie
Photo by Warren Little, Getty Images

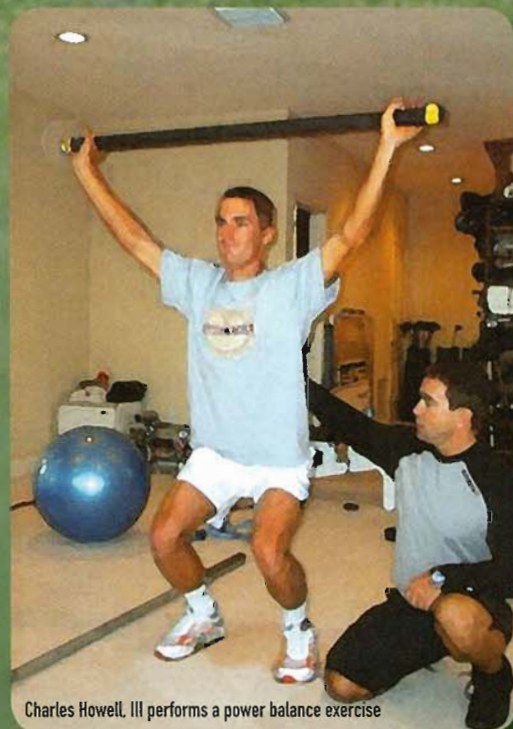
Michael Campbell
Photo by Stuart Fraikin, Getty Images

Exercise physiologists have a joke that goes something like "Sports can be divided into three categories: aerobic, anaerobic—and golf!" Then there's the debate on whether golf is actually a sport or should be regarded as a game, such as chess or poker, or perhaps as a manual dexterity skill such as required with driving a car or playing video games. But anyone who has ever played golf knows that just because those who participate in this tremendously popular activity may dress in preppy clothing, it is indeed a sport. And a tremendously difficult one at that.

To excel in golf, one needs a unique combination of power (to drive the ball long distances) and fine motor skills (to sink puts). Add to that the ability to make eyeball calculations about the physics of the surfaces of a golf course, and you have an activity that everyone can play and enjoy but only a few can truly master.

Two athletes who have proven that they have what it takes to play golf at the highest levels are Michael Campbell and Michelle Wie. This year Michael upset Tiger Woods to win the US Open, and Michelle Wie is a 15-year-old phenom who can drive the ball 300 yards and has set a goal of competing in men's competition. And although Campbell and Wie are distinctly different individuals, they do have one thing in common: Paul Gagné.

A strength coach in Canada, Gagné has worked with more than 100 professional athletes from a variety of sports. He has also given advanced seminars on stretching, nutrition, posture correction and energy system training. Recently he



Charles Howell, III performs a power balance exercise

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has become sought after to help golfers achieve higher levels of perfection. Wie, Campbell and many others, including Charles Howell III, who three years ago was ranked in the top 12 money winners in the world, are among his clients.

In this exclusive interview, Gagné reveals some of the secrets of training golfers to fulfill their athletic potential.

BFS: Why is hitting a golf ball so difficult?

Gagné: One objective of the game is to move a very light object with a small sweet spot as fast as you can in a state of balance. That is extremely difficult. But golf is not only about swinging a club to hit long drives — it's also about chipping, putting and strategy.

BFS: Why do so many golfers sustain back and knee injuries?

Gagné: It's a unilateral sport in that the golfer is always turning and the feet are fixed, and if a golfer doesn't have a proper strength training program or has problems with their feet, they can develop injuries. Having said that, I do train golfers in their 60s and 70s who don't have these problems.

BFS: What's the best cross-training sport for golf?

Gagné: Hockey is a good one, as it provides rotational activities and is played on a slippery surface.

BFS: Tiger Woods started young, and Michael Wie is among the top in her sport at only 15. Is it necessary for an athlete to start young to excel in the sport?

Gagné: Golf requires a high level of motor skills, and as such it's necessary to start at a young age to excel in it. Research says that the maturity of the proprioceptive system occurs primarily before the age of 12. The same goes with other qualities. For example, it is very difficult to learn a language or to develop creative skills such as in dance or music if you start after the age of 12.

BFS: Is a high level of strength necessary for golf?

Gagné: The primary strength component in golf is starting strength. You don't necessarily have to be very strong, but you have to be able to apply strength very rapidly. Now Michelle Wie, who has a goal of being able to play in tournaments with the guys, will require a relatively high level of starting strength for a woman. That's why after this season, most of my strength training with Michelle will be with Olympic lifting.

BFS: Would a powerlifting program, one that just emphasized squats, benches and deadlifts, be helpful to a golfer?

Gagné: Not very, as there's no eccentric loading in golf. Also, golfers don't have much time to train — these athletes often practice up to six, sometimes even eight, hours a day. With such a time commitment, the Olympic lifts are better: From a conditioning standpoint they give more "bang for the buck" because they improve starting strength and body awareness. I also want to avoid muscle soreness as much as possible, which happens when you focus on powerlifting exercises.

BFS: Do you have your golfers perform any strength training outside the gym?

Gagné: Because of their time commitments for practice, it's difficult for these athletes to get to a gym. As such, I do a lot of work with a pulling sled and medicine ball exercises because they can be performed outside

before and after practice.

BFS: How important are rotational exercises for golf?

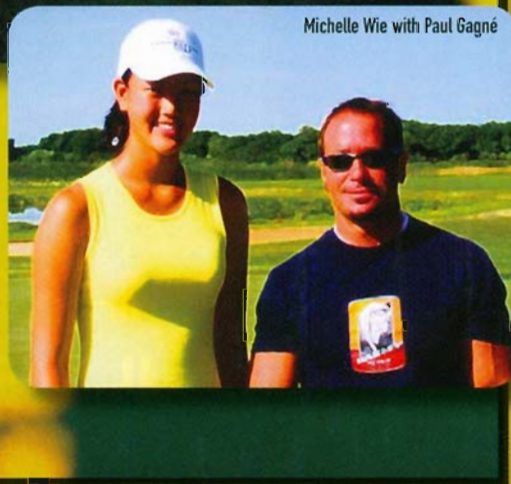
Gagné: Golfers get enough rotational movement in their sport, so I usually don't do them. I've also found that exercises such as the power balance drills will work on counter-rotation to prevent muscle imbalances.



Michelle Wie uses the medicine ball as a warm-up exercise



Michelle Wie with Paul Gagné



BFS: Do you do any special abdominal training for golf?

Gagné: To play golf you need to be aware of all the different contractions of the various abdominal muscles, but I don't go overboard with so many of the Swiss ball exercises many conditioning coaches recommend. For those golfers who need specialized abdominal exercises, I would send them to a good exercise physiologist — don't assume that because a personal trainer may be certified, he or she knows how to teach abdominal exercises properly.

BFS: In the photo you sent us you are shown throwing a medicine ball to Michelle Wie. Is this a typical part of her strength training program?

Gagné: She uses that exercise as a warm-up. Prior to practice, we might have Michelle do some medicine balls while standing on an unstable disk to activate her nervous system and improve balance.

BFS: Do you do anything special to increase her club speed?

Gagné: We might have her hold the club at the other end of the shaft and take a few swings, then turn it around and swing normally. This contrast method is effective for increasing club speed and appears to reduce the time it takes her to warm up during practice.

BFS: Many golf conditioning programs involve exercises that try to mimic the golf swing with resistance. Do you recommend this?

Gagné: That's the worst type of exercise you could do for a golfer — if anything you want to use a lighter implement. Repetition of the exact swing used in a game is critical to a golfer, and these exercises will adversely affect technique. A great example of this is Michael Jordan's efforts to play major league baseball, which was discussed in detail in Dr. Harold Klawans' excellent book, *Why Michael Couldn't Hit*.

Jordan's swing speed was excellent, but he didn't have enough practice perfecting his swing technique and facing high-quality pitching at a young age.

BFS: Other than the Olympic lifts, what other exercises do you have your golfers perform?

Gagné: I use the glute-ham raise a lot with my golfers because it teaches the athletes to use the hamstring while they're working the torso. I use a BFS 3-in-1 squat box to perform box squats, as this exercise really works the hips, which are a major component in the golf swing. To develop dynamic flexibility and improve body awareness, I have my golfers perform power balance exercises, sometimes with chains. I also have all my golfers perform special eye exercises that help their balance and posture.

BFS: What about grip exercises?

Gagné: Yes, I perform a lot of grip exercises because if a golfer's grip is strong, they will not have to hold the club as hard and this will improve their club action. This is one reason I love the Hex bar for tall athletes such as Michelle Wie. Not only does it work Michelle's hip extensors without excessively loading her spine — and compression forces on the spine can be a problem with taller athletes such as Michelle — it also works her grip. Again, like the snatch or clean it's an exercise that gives me a lot of "bang for the buck."

BFS: Describe your working relationship with the golf pros.

Gagné: I sit down with the golf pro and the therapist and we plan our training as a team. For example, if the golf pro says that an athlete is having a problem attaining certain positions in the swing, we'll deter-

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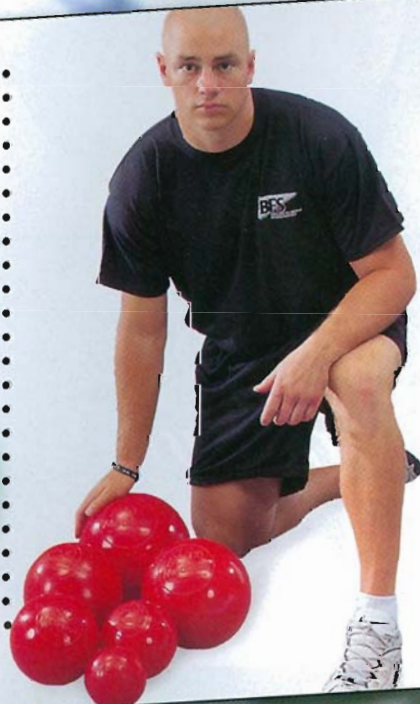


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mine what type of therapy or corrective exercises are needed. Michael Campbell, a former rugby player for New Zealand, has a mesomorphic build and develops strength quickly. For him we focused on dynamic flexibility and now we're working on explosiveness with Olympic lifting movements.

BFS: Is it a problem that many of the new golfers you train don't have an athletic background?

Gagné: Yes, and this is a problem when young athletes focus solely on golf and don't play a variety of sports or perform supplemental conditioning. This is one of the qualities that distinguishes Michelle Wie from many women golfers — she is an amazing athlete who is explosive and learns quickly. I could train her for just about any sport. Charles Howell III is a very good, explosive athlete. Although he only weighs 155 pounds, he has excellent drives.

BFS: Some golf conditioning coaches suggest running to help endurance to stay 18 holes. Is energy system training important to a golfer?

Gagné: I have 80-year-old clients who walk 18 holes, so the energy demands can't be that great. There's also no research that shows that aerobic conditioning will help you sustain pressure during a golf game. If handling pressure is a problem, there are breathing techniques that can help — yoga can be valuable in this regard.

BFS: Do you recommend anything special in the area of diet or nutritional aids for your golfers?

Gagné: It's important that golfers stay well hydrated, so they need to drink a lot of water and avoid caffeine. Fish oils can help concentration, and green tea has a calming effect on the body that can help a golfer.

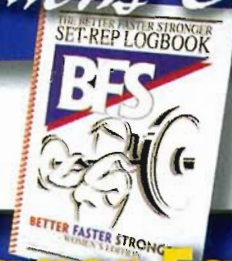
BFS: What advice would you give to a strength coach who wants to work with golfers?

Gagné: Don't try to represent yourself as a sport coach. It's not our business, and we have enough work to do to make golfers better athletes. In fact, in the French language the expression "strength coach" doesn't exist. We have an expression that translates into "physical preparers," and that's basically what we do. We prepare the athlete's body to accomplish anything the sport asks of it.

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