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The Man Who Cracked The Code

L.A.'s Mike Austin Has Hit a Golf Ball Farther Than Any Human. But There's Something Even More Astounding About His 1974 World-Record Drive: He Knew Exactly What He Was Doing.

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Mike Austin's golf swing first appears in a flickering black-and-white film clip. He's a young man, wearing plus fours, his long hair flying as he lays into the ball. In the film's next segment his hair is white, and he sports a thin mustache as he drills laser-like iron shots. Finally, he's in his 70s, crushing balls at a local driving range, the crowd cheering wildly as he launches each shot at the same trajectory, as if firing the balls from a mortar.

Austin, now 91, cuts off the video and leans back in his easy chair. The living room of his Woodland Hills home is decorated with photos of his long career in golf. Putters and drivers still lean against the walls. But the clubs aren't for him - a stroke has left him partially paralyzed and he no longer plays golf. The clubs are for the students who come from all around the world wanting to learn from this man, the longest hitter ever to play a game that today is reaching new heights of popularity.

Watching films of Austin's swing sometimes puzzles his students. Where

is the raw power from someone who once blasted a golf ball through the Los Angeles phone book? Where is the savage strength from someone who, in his prime, could drive the ball past any of the young guns on today's PGA tour, including Tiger Woods? Instead, Austin's swing looks graceful, balanced and effortless. As Austin puts it, "I just felt like I was swinging at cruising speed."

What separates Austin from the pack of golf gurus, know-it-alls, and bulked-up long-drive champions is his knowledge of physics, anatomy and kinesiology. Not only could he knock the ball out of sight, but he can tell you what every bone and muscle needs to do to hit every shot dead solid perfect.

It was Austin's unique knowledge, coupled with superb athletic ability, that put him in the "Guinness Book of World Records" for hitting the longest drive in a tournament. And he did it while in his mid-60s, using a persimmon driver with a steel shaft. It wasn't just a solo shot, either. He had been astounding the golf world for years with his length (not to mention his larger than life off-the-course exploits). He could hit the ball righty, lefty, with one arm, with clubs turned upside down, or even - as he once did to win a bet - with a taped-up Coke bottle.

Is it possible that Austin succeeded in cracking golf's code? Did he find a way to match this imperfect machine - the human body - to the perfect golf swing? If you ask Austin to explain how he does it, he first fixes you in the sights of his piercing eyes, then he begins speaking in a rumbling voice hinting of his upbringing in both Scotland and the

Deep South. Listen carefully because the lesson is about to begin.

On Sept. 25, 1974, Austin was playing in the U.S. National Seniors Open Championship at the Winterwood Golf Course in Las Vegas, a course since renamed Desert Rose. He was 64 at the time, and had been a PGA pro for many years. He had been driving the ball exceptionally well that day, even by his standards. On the 450-yard, par 4 fifth hole, one of his partners, PGA pro Chandler Harper, told Austin, "I've never seen anyone hit the ball as far as you. Let's see you really let one go."

Austin, a longtime gambler and trick shot artist, took the challenge. Word that Austin was going to go for it was relayed to the foursome on the green ahead. They stood safely to one side. Austin drew back and unleashed a blast that flew more than 400 yards, bounced in front of the green and came to rest 65 yards beyond the flag-stick. That shot set the Guinness world record as the longest drive ever recorded in a PGA tournament: 515 yards. Austin recalls that the ball didn't follow a normal parabolic curve. Instead, it went up 20 feet, leveled off, and held its line. Austin's wife, Tanya, who was also at the tournament, said, "It was like God held it up in the air."

Skeptics might try to explain away such a feat. True, a tail wind was blowing. But consider Tiger Woods' description of his longest drive last February. "I remember hitting one in a practice round at Royal Birkdale at the British Open in '98," Woods said in an interview on "Larry King Live." "It was howling downwind. And I hit it as hard as I possibly could, just for heck of it.

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And I hit it 412 yards"-- 103 yards shorter than Austin's record-setter.

For pros on the PGA tour, distance is one of several factors leading to victory. The motto "Drive for show, putt for dough" holds a lot of truth. But the galleries love the big drives unleashed by Woods and John Daly. When a tour player drops a nice putt, it rarely prompts a fan to holler, "You da man!"

So a splinter group of big hitters has emerged--legions of buffed golfers who pump iron and rip towering shots in long-drive competitions. But Austin doesn't exactly belong in that group. At 6-foot-2, 222 pounds in his prime, he was a powerful man. Yet his swing, as seen in films taken throughout his life, has more rhythm and balance than raw power and strength. It appears almost effortless.

I first heard of Austin five years ago, and as a weekend golfer I knew I'd pay dearly for even a fraction of his distance. I'd long been tempted to take a lesson from him - he was named one of the top 50 instructors by Golf Magazine in 1991 - except for one thing: he doesn't suffer fools easily. A lesson with Austin is like asking Mario Andretti to help you get your learner's permit. Still, I studied his video, talked to his disciples and applied his methods. My scores have dropped, occasionally into the 70s. But my distance remains average.

When we finally meet, I ask Austin if he can teach me to break the 300-yard barrier. "Distance has little to do with size or strength," he says. "All it requires is supple quickness." Supple quickness. I ponder that resonant phrase for a long time. And, in it, I find hope.

Austin's protégé, Mike Dunaway, is a long-drive champion and club tester for Callaway Golf Co., headquartered in Carlsbad, Calif. At a long-drive competition in Pomona in 1977, a machine clocked Dunaway's swing at 130 miles per hour. (An average golfer's speed is from 70 to 80 miles per hour; Austin's swing was once measured at 155 miles per hour.) Dunaway says

Austin, also at the competition, heard about his speed and told him, "Come work with me, I'll make you a world's champion."

Austin has undergraduate degrees in engineering, physics and psychology, and a doctorate degree in kinesiology (the analysis of muscular motion). He has used his knowledge of all these fields to develop and refine his golf swing. Dunaway recalls watching Austin hit the ball with a sense of disbelief. "I didn't see the speed in his swing, but he was getting it way out there," Dunaway says, his reaction typical of those who have watched Austin's ball explode effortlessly off the clubface.

After moving to Los Angeles from Arkansas, Dunaway worked intensely with Austin for six months. It changed his life. Now 46, living in Rogers, Ark., he is a golf instructor and producer of his own cable TV show, "Golfing Arkansas."

"I don't base my swing on anyone else except what Mike taught me," Dunaway says. "I don't have an original thought in any of my teaching."

Dunaway, who is preparing to join the senior tour, averages between 326 and 340 yards with his driver. Not only are his drives long, but he says they're extremely accurate. "When you fully grasp what he [Austin] is doing you almost feel guilty hitting the ball because it's so easy," he says, laughing.

While it seems almost too good to be true, Austin's swing is also said to prevent the back injuries that often plague regular golfers. "There are six types of joints and they have to work according to their design," Austin says. "Otherwise you wind up with arthritis, tendonitis, bursitis and all the other ailments." Austin says the copper bands worn by many pro golfers, and frequent reports of back and shoulder surgery, are proof of how punishing the conventional golf swing can be.

While Tiger Woods pounds the ball, Austin believes he's headed for trouble. "He starts with his legs, which is great. Otherwise he'd be in the hospital. But

then he locks his shoulders and hips together," as he turns. "What he's doing is costing him one hell of a lot of [unnecessary] energy."

Austin says his swing conforms to the basic laws of physics. "All the joints are working according to their design," he says. "That's called the physiology of the body. Understand?"

Throughout his career, Austin has been at odds with the PGA. He claims that, years ago, PGA pros bribed tournament officials not to play alongside Austin so their drives wouldn't be dwarfed by his. He also is critical of PGA teachers who, he says, "have perfected imperfection" in teaching faulty golfing methods. He maintains that teaching pros should have a degree in kinesiology to better understand how to present the golf swing to their students.

Austin's swing differs from conventional teaching in two ways: the setup position and the hand action. Most golf teachers tell students to bend their legs and lean forward from the waist. Austin's students bend forward at the hip joints and keep the spine relatively straight. The hips swing like a bell below a head that stays in nearly the same position. Austin encourages his students to make use of the power generated by their legs. The real punch in Austin's swing comes from a subtle but essential hand motion called the "release." The difference between a good and bad release is, to adapt Mark Twain's words, the difference between "lightning and the lightning bug." It's a motion so difficult to describe that it's usually not covered in golf instruction books at all. It is similar to an underhand throwing motion that accelerates the clubhead into the ball. Most golfers only throw their clubs after muffing a tee shot or blowing a short putt. But Austin tells his students to throw the clubhead at the ball, then catch it an instant later and guide the club to a high, graceful finish.

The magic of the release is in the acceleration, Austin says, and he leans forward in his recliner to demonstrate. While the stroke has left him with limited movement, his eyes are like

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chips of flint and his mind is a laser beam. In a rumbling voice he says, "Put your hand out here, I'm going to do something to you."

I obey. He smacks the palm of my hand with the knuckles of his left hand. "Did that hurt?" he asks.

"Not really." "Now this is accelerating." He hits my hand again and later, listening to the tape of the interview, I hear a loud, crisp smack. My hand stings for a half hour. "You release the contraction of the muscles and [it] becomes a free-moving object," Austin says. "You are actually freezing muscle when you flex it."

The release - this subtle, yet explosive motion - was the first lesson Austin ever received. Born on the Isle of Guernsey in 1910, he went to take a lesson at a local golf course when he was 6. It had just rained and the course was closed, Austin recalls.

The pro told young Austin to take a golfing stance next to a nearby bank and swing the clubhead into the wet clay. But the pro added, "If you come back here with mud on your sleeve, I'm going to kick you right in your back end." To keep his sleeve from getting muddy he had to stop his hands and let the clubhead fly forward into the bank. Although he didn't realize it until later, this exercise trained Austin to hit the ball with a full release. Stop-action photos of effective golf swings actually show that the hands slow down as the clubhead accelerates through the ball.

Austin's family moved to golf's birthplace, Scotland, then to America, living first in Boston, where his mother gave voice lessons. In 1923 they moved to Atlanta, near the East Lake Golf Club. There Austin often watched the legendary Bobby Jones, then in his early 20s, working with the club's pro, Stewart Maiden. At one point, Austin, still a teenager, says Jones asked him to explain how he hit the ball so far.

Austin turned pro at 18. Unlike today, where tournament purses are sometimes a half a million dollars, it was tough for a golfer to live on his winnings. Instead, Austin began making

money as a gambler and trick-shot expert at exhibitions.

Each winter he left his home in Atlanta and drove to Jacksonville, Fla., where he stopped at the local golf course. "I told the pro, 'I'm a PGA member and I'm a gambler. I'll play anybody, for any amount of money.'" He says his feats soon earned him the nickname "The Golfing Bandit."

Austin often played for high stakes against gangsters vacationing in Florida from the Northern cities. To try to beat him, he says, they'd sometimes kick his ball into the rough or stomp it into the ground. Once, when he tried to collect his winnings, he says one of the gangsters brandished a machine gun and threatened to shoot his hands off. As word got out how good Austin was, it became harder for him to get a game. So he played left-handed, one-handed, or with his clubs turned upside down. Once, Austin says, he won \$10,000 by making par with a taped-up Coke bottle that he swung while in a semi-sitting position. Later, Austin toured the country putting on golf exhibitions. "I could hit 96 different shots with a set of normal golf clubs," Austin recalled. "I'd say, 'See that pole there? I'm going to start the ball at the pole and it will finish up at the trash can. Now I'm going to start the ball at the trash can and finish up at the pole.'"

Austin also was a fearsome boxer, winning fights as a heavyweight across the Southeast. But as he was being examined for a match in Atlanta, the doctor found Austin's heart was beating 166 times a minute, apparently because of the adrenaline pouring into his system. Austin recalls the doctor became alarmed, saying, "'Get this man on a gurney. He's dying!' I said, 'I've never felt better in my life.'" But the doctor declared him unfit, the fight was canceled, and that was the end of Austin's boxing career.

The adrenaline surges Austin experienced played havoc with his short game on and around the greens. "I was the worst putter on the tour. I had no control over the adrenaline in my system. It gave me extra power, but

when I went to hit a putt, it went off on me." (In fact, on the hole where Austin hit his record-setting drive, he chipped onto the green and three-putted for a bogey.)

In 1939 Austin moved to Los Angeles to be a pro at the Wilshire Country Club. He was an accomplished operatic singer and had contracts with several major studios. He also roomed with actor Errol Flynn, and together they prowled the local hot spots. He worked as an engineer on a highly classified aerospace project in the late 1940s, the beginning of what would later become the space program. All that time he was playing tournaments and teaching as much as he could at the driving range at the Studio City Golf and Tennis Club.

Because of his education in physics and engineering, Austin couldn't settle for just playing the game of golf. He developed revolutionary putters, irons, drivers and a swing trainer called "The Flammer." The device, best known after Kevin Costner wore one in the film "Tin Cup," connects the club to the body by a telescoping rod and teaches golfers to turn their body for more power. Austin has sold more than 500,000 Flammers.

My long-anticipated lesson with Austin came one blistering afternoon in July. Although Austin still drives his big white Cadillac to teaching sessions at the Studio City range, he prefers the convenience of coaching students on his front lawn. He sits nearby in a lawn chair as I set up over a practice ball. As soon as I take the club back, Austin stops me, a tortured tone in his voice as if I've committed a mortal sin.

Dunaway recalls similar encounters while Austin was coaching him. "We'd almost get in a fight. He cannot tolerate someone not doing what he says to do." Dunaway began videotaping the lessons and watching them later, when the heat of the moment had passed and left him in a better frame of mind to absorb Austin's teachings.

I struggled to fully comprehend Austin's instructions, and my teacher grew more exasperated. But later,

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reflecting on his demands, I realized that Austin had identified a distance-siphoning flaw in my swing. At the top of my backswing, my wrists were completely uncocked. As Austin correctly pointed out, how could I expect to get distance if I had already expended my most potent weapon?

Jon Mortensen, director of biomechanics for Farnes Golf in Tacoma, Wash., says golfers come to the facility to have their swings analyzed by a computer that makes a 3-D picture of their motion. Their swing is then compared to a database of the swings of more than 200 golf pros. Mortensen is amazed when told about his record-setting drive.

I explain to Mortensen that Austin believes the secret of distance is in the release. He agrees, saying that their studies have shown the release is a tremendous part of a golfer's distance. He said that, among the world's golfers, long-ball hitters "have the most explosive power in the release, and they do it later" in the swing. Mortensen also agrees with Austin that bending forward from the hips is better for the back and puts the golfer into a more powerful position.

How can these elements be taught to the average golfer? "The release is tough to teach," he says. "In all the books I've read, I've never seen a good way to teach it. A lot of it is genetic, natural-born athlete stuff." Plus, he says, "we're talking about a sequence of actions that are separated by hundredths of a second."

Still, Austin has had remarkable success as a teacher. Over the years, Austin gave golf lessons to the rich and famous, from crooner Bing Crosby to Spanish pro Seve Ballesteros to billionaire industrialist Howard Hughes. James A. Ullrich of Conroe, Texas, took lessons from both Austin and Dunaway. At 62 years old, he is belting the ball farther than ever, occasionally more than 300 yards. "There's no question that I'm longer because of Mike. And down here in Texas, that's what it's all about."

Betsy Cullen, an Austin student and three-time winner on the LPGA tour, teaches at the Pine Forest Country Club in Houston. "He's not only a good teacher for students, but he's a good teacher for teachers," she says. "He expresses things in different ways, and uses images that makes it easier to understand." Cullen comes to see Austin at least twice a year for a tune-up. "He does get passionate sometimes. I videotape my lessons, too. That's the best way to learn."

Fitness guru Jack La Lanne, now 87, took up golf at age 50 and, with Austin's help, became a four handicapper. "Mike was incredible," La Lanne says. "Nobody hit the ball any farther. And he knew every shot in the book. If only he could putt. I used to tell him he should get a brain transplant" to overcome his putting woes.

Six weeks after my lesson from Mike Austin, I tee up the ball on the 17th hole of a country club course near San Diego. My playing partner is a 6-foot-2 slugger who can really wallop a drive down the fairway. I'm getting ready to hit when Austin's words come back to me--supple quickness--and I uncork a good one.

As I watch the white ball hang in the air I think again of what Dunaway said: "When you fully grasp what he's doing, you almost feel guilty hitting the ball because it's so easy." When I get to my ball, I find it is 260 yards from the tee box. It's not a Guinness world record, but it is a few yards past my partner's ball. That counts a lot.