

HEEL against the HEAD

These days your top tour players don't dare travel alone. There's a fitness trainer, psychologist, golf coach, bodyguard, pilot, PR lady, shoe-shiner and don't forget the bag-carrier guy. OK, the last few we made up, but the point remains the same – and if you really want to get ahead, you might want to make sure Doug Heel's in your entourage, reckons *Brendan Barratt*.



DOUG HEEL DESCRIBES himself as “a surfer boy from Cape Town” and in his T-shirt and boardshorts or, on a serious business day, perhaps a tracksuit, you might fall for the ruse. A brief look at his CV, however, tells a different story: among others, he has worked with the Springbok rugby team, Miami Dolphins, Ajax Cape Town, Wladimir Klitschko and Team Barloworld at the Tour de France. Is it a coincidence that both David Frost and James Kingston came bursting back onto the scene and have had their best-ever seasons on the European Tour after sessions with Heel? Or that the Blue Bulls managed to claim the Super 14 title for the very first time – also after some valuable Heel-time? The answer, we would contest after a bit of Heeling of our own, is no, and here's why.

Doug Heel's area of expertise is called muscle activation and it's one of the most exciting

additions to the modern 'holistic approach' to golf coaching that includes experts who look after your mental health, physical health and of course the health of your golf swing. What is it all about then? Well, the theory is that over time – and we are talking many years here – we have all 'forgotten' how to use certain muscles in our body through inaction. So what happens is that other muscles take over, compensating for the inactive ones. By not using these muscles in our daily lives they have gone dormant and, if you compare the suppleness of a toddler to that of most adults, who are generally unable to even touch their toes, you're starting to get an idea of how we have lost that muscle movement over time. Well, the good news is that we haven't really lost these muscles – they are still there, but it is just a matter of activating them and getting our body used

to the fact that they do, in fact, still exist.

Why would we want to use these muscles? Heel explains: “It is about enabling athletes to achieve the best that they can with what they have got, and most people are not even scratching the surface of their potential.”

To illustrate his theory, Heel has enough stories to keep a bar entertained until closing time – and they all relate to a kind of 'miracle moment' when someone who has been using, for example, only his or her upper-body muscles, suddenly discovers how easy it is to perform when the lower body is also working. One of my favourites was the anecdote about Os du Randt. The story goes that Heel was invited to a Bok training session and he'd been keeping a close eye on the big guy since his return to rugby. What Doug had noticed was that Os tended to curve his back when running with the ball – a classic case of

the body overcompensating for other muscles not doing what they should. To illustrate, five-foot-something Doug Heel, weighing in at a tad under your average scrumhalf, asked Os to resist him and then proceeded to push one of SA rugby's most celebrated front-rankers around the field with two fingers! It certainly got the lad's attention – and had it not been for a typically shortsighted case of politics within the Bok medical set-up, Heel would still be working with the team rather than simply accepting some individual players into his gym as 'private' clients. These kinds of politics are an ongoing theme in Heel's past. As the Sports Science Institute admitted (to its credit), he's working in a cutting-edge field that not many actually understand – and no-one likes to be shown up by a guy who's doing things that you can't do! It's this aspect of what Doug Heel does that gives him a

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rather disarming, trademark grin. When he looks at you, or observes anyone doing anything, he has a look on his face that says, “I know something you don't!” And you know what? He does.

So, in layman's terms then, what's it all about? Muscle activation involves locating certain pressure points on the body and pressing or rubbing them hard in order to release the muscle that has been inactive for so long.

Once these core muscles are active, the body is no longer fighting itself to perform certain movements and is significantly more stable – in other words, we are talking about both flexibility and strength all at once. Of course, the activation eventually 'wears off', but if you activate enough times, your body eventually starts to remember what it's supposed to be doing. There's definitely an element of 'freaky' about the technique – like for example the fact that in order to activate the large gluteus muscles (that's your backside) you actually press on points behind your jaw and down the back of your neck. “The way I explain it is like this,” said Doug. “If you come to me with a headache, the first thing I do is ask you to remove your shoe to check you don't have a stone in it. Everything is linked together – if you're tense in your jaw and neck, you probably aren't using muscles lower down ➔

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in the body – like the glutes which are extremely important in the golf swing.”

Heel has some pretty impressive testimonials, but the most fascinating ones relate to golf, where his association with top swing coach Robert Baker has put him in contact with some interesting golfers. “What do I know about golf?” he laughs. “Nothing – it is up to your pro to fix your swing problems. But if you are physically unable to get your body into a certain position, it is going to be impossible to do what your pro wants you to do.”

The first example that Heel mentions is James Kingston. Kingston was battling with a sore neck in the South African Open at Pearl Valley last year and his movement was restricted, so much so that he considered withdrawing from the tournament. “I took him through a session of about 20 minutes,” says Heel, “and afterwards he said that he had never felt his swing the same way.” Kingston went on to win the event. David Frost was put on a muscle-activation programme by Heel in December of last year and the 48-year-old went on to have one of the best seasons of his career, earning over \$600 000 and making 15 straight cuts.

The association with Baker runs a bit deeper than a couple of European Tour players though, as Heel’s methods are now being adopted by the numerous Logical Golf Academies across the globe. The beauty



Ouch! An activation session starts with Doug testing flexibility of various muscle groups – and then activating muscles by rubbing pressure points which, as our intrepid reporter discovered, can be a tad painful the first time!

of it all is in the simplicity of the method, and your golf instructor will now not only be able to teach you how to play better golf, but teach you how to activate your muscles yourself in order to make it easier to achieve the correct swing – it’s called Logical Activation, and I decided to give it a go at the Logical Golf Academy in Cape Town.

With Doug exhibiting a strangely evil glint in his eye, we set about testing his muscle activation techniques at the River Club.

“Would you consider yourself very flexible?” Doug asked while I was slapping a few shots in the hitting bay, and I got the feeling it was a question he had thrown out many times before – his way of setting me up. Um, that would be a no – at six-foot-three it would be an achievement to reach my ankles, never mind my toes.

“Let’s do a little test,” he quipped and he had me lie flat on my back so that he could test how flexible my hamstrings were by lifting up one straight leg at a time. At about 45 degrees it was pretty clear that my leg could not lift any further and Doug was less than impressed. “It’s the same test I did on Os du Randt,” he said, “and even he could lift his leg higher than that.”

“This might tickle a bit,” he said, pressing on my abdomen, either side of my belly button, as I winced in pain but attempted to look



The customised bungee cord is one of Doug’s favourite aids. Basically, if your core muscles aren’t activated, you’ll never be able to swing the club without being pulled backwards. A quick slapping of the inner thighs, however, and you’ll find that you magically seem to be able to stay grounded throughout the swing.



hard – much like Os would have done.

“So you think I am talking s**t then?” Doug asked after what seemed like an eternity of abdomen crunching. “Well then, what do you make of this?” My eyes nearly popped out of my head as Doug lifted my leg beyond 45 degrees, beyond 90 degrees and up to 100 degrees, my knee almost knocking my face. Doug laughed, “Os had the same expression – it’s my little buy-in trick.”

It wasn’t to be his only trick either, as Doug spent the afternoon torturing me with plenty of other pressure-point muscle-activation techniques. He seemed to be enjoying it too, smiling at me while I concentrated on not bursting into tears in front of the camera. The thing is though, after each session I would return to the hitting bay and swing the club a little easier than I had before. Doug explained how each time I activated a muscle it would

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help with a certain part of the swing and that Logical Golf instructors would be able to see not only the faults in the swing but the muscles needed to fix it.

My golf professional Cameron was less of a physical sadist than Doug, but was equally scathing about my golf grip. “You’re far too closed,” he observed, “and you swing back inside the line. I can help you fix those problems, but let’s work on your balance first.”

A couple of muscle-activation techniques

and a few expletives from me later and I could totally feel the difference standing over the ball as I felt looser, stronger and more balanced. “I don’t believe it,” I said, sounding like an infomercial. “This stuff actually does work – and it makes sense too.” As a thoroughbred sceptic I had secretly hoped to disprove the work of Mr Heel and the gang, but the surfer from Cape Town had managed to make a believer out of me.

“Go ahead and hit a few balls,” Cameron instructed, “but try swinging a lot slower, just to see how it feels.” What followed were three of the most stupidly pure 3-iron strikes I have ever had, the ball absolutely smashing off the face despite swinging at half speed.

“You’re actually swinging faster than before,” Cameron observed. “It just feels slower. If you don’t believe me, check the video.” Turns out he was right.

So is this the answer to finding your perfect golf swing? Even Doug Heel is not convinced, “Muscle activation won’t suddenly make you into a good golfer but it will give you the ability to do what you do better.” Yeah, and I bet Os du Randt couldn’t hit a 3-iron like I just did.

■ If you want to see what it feels like to be treated like a Springbok prop, drop Doug a line at douglash@netactive.co.za – or contact Logical Golf on 021 448 6358 to find your nearest activating instructor!



For simple muscle-activation exercises that you can do at your desk, log onto www.compleatgolfer.co.za and click on the link.

Once the activation is complete, the pro can get in on the act and start the technical training. Cameron identified Brendan’s grip problem straight away – but half of his job had already been done by Doug activating his core and sorting out his posture without the pro having to say a word!

