



## Last Word by Jimmy Roberts of NBC Sports

**“Golf is both beautiful and cruel: How in the world am I ever going to reclaim this at the beginning of the season when it can do me some good?”**

# Winter Rules

**I**t was early November, and the worst of all possible golf things happened to me. I went to the driving range and I absolutely striped it. Instead of my more than occasional multi swing-thought paralysis, every step in the normally confusing process seemed to serenely fold into a Zen-like motion that culminated with an obscenely satisfying and unfamiliar click. Could that possibly be *my* ball flight?

So what’s so terrible about this, you ask? Absolutely nothing if it’s April, but as I look down, the ground is covered with aeration plugs and withered leaves and I have the sickest feeling. Why now? Golf is both beautiful and cruel: How in the world am I ever going to reclaim this at the *beginning* of the season when it can do me some good?

It’s an age-old problem for all of us who live in places where “winter golf” generally means we watch other people play on TV.

“I actually had a net in our basement and I practiced pitch shots – basically mini-swings,” says my friend and colleague Dottie Pepper, winner of 17 LPGA events including a pair of majors. Pepper was a hotshot junior golfer in Wilton, New York, near Saratoga Springs... but that was only after she spent the winter months working as a ski instructor at Gore Mountain. She had a variety of strategies to keep her game from going into the deep freeze.

“I also used to make full swings in slow speed in a full length mirror, checking things like my grip and position at the top. I would practice putts on our kitchen and family room carpets. They were fast, and I knew every break!”

Pepper went away to Furman University in South Carolina in 1983 and has been a Florida resident since 1989, so it’s been awhile

since she’s had to worry about shoveling a driveway. But there are others among the skilled set who’ve chosen to turn their back on the land of the 12-month golf season.

“I know it might sound crazy,” says PGA Tour pro Dudley Hart, “but I got kind of tired of 85 and sunny every day. I needed four seasons.”

So after 24 years of living in Florida, Hart this past August moved back to Buffalo, where he grew up. He wanted his five-year-old triplets to have the “grounded” childhood he did. The son of a golf pro, Hart took up the game at four and was a serious player by 11. As a child, golf’s off-season meant hockey, so working on his swing in the winter generally involved refining his slap shot. Now though, things are much different.

“There’s a golf bubble near our house, so I’ll go there and hit some balls,” says Hart, “but I think the most important thing you can do to preserve a swing that’s working is to write stuff down. Keep a notebook in your golf bag and write down what’s going through your mind... your swing thoughts when things are working well, and keep going back to it.”

And on another matter of interest to Met Area winter denizens...

“If I wear anything more than a thermal, a golf shirt, a thin sweater and a wind shirt, I don’t really want to play golf. What’s the point? I won’t really be able to swing anyway.”

Of course the best advice for preserving the integrity of your game and staying warm comes from my friend Vince, an 18 or so handicap who lives in New England. “The only solution,” he says, “is to go from the range directly to the airport... and head south.” ■