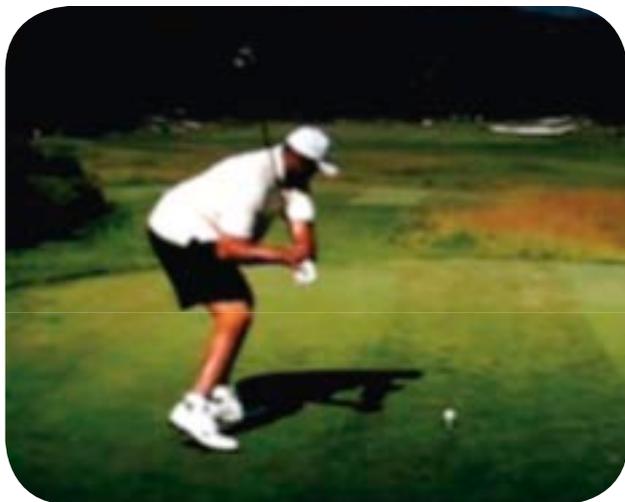


/PROJECT BARKLEY/

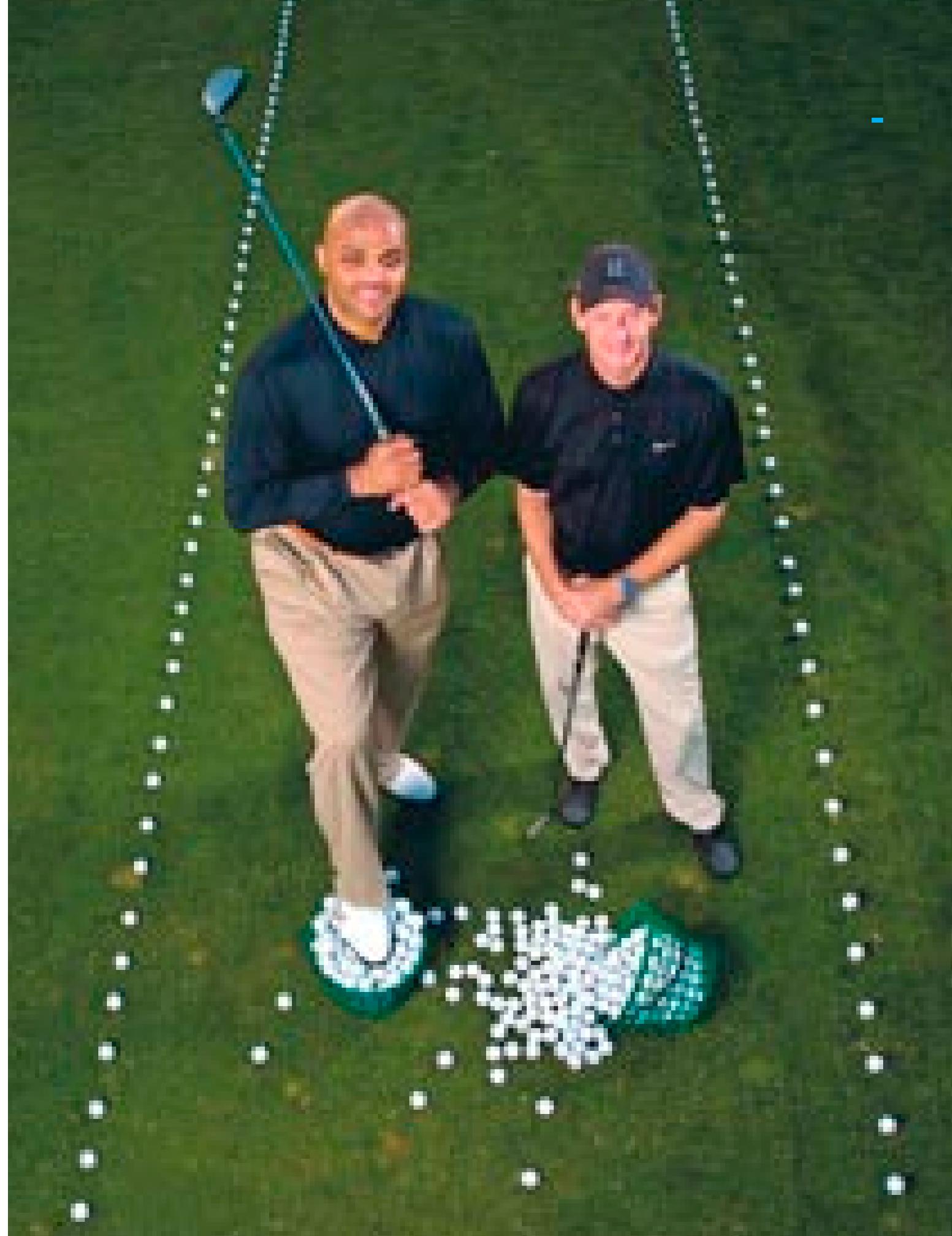


CAN HANK HANEY FIX THIS SWING?

BY MATTHEW RUDY

The sweat pours off Charles Barkley's bald head in rivulets as he hits his 604th ball of the day into a thick green tarp at an indoor range in suburban Dallas. "Again," deadpans Hank Haney from his perch on a stool behind the retired NBA star. Barkley closes his eyes and pantomimes an exaggeratedly flat backswing once, twice, three times. "Good. Now hit it." Barkley is fifteen years and half a dozen

WATCH PROJECT BARKLEY WITH HANK HANEY
Premieres the Golf Channel Monday, March 2 at 9 p.m.





YOUTUBE SENSATION:

For Barkley, watching his infamous swing on YouTube (bottom) is more painful than negotiating Haney's lineup of 50 range balls.

surgeries removed from his Round Mound of Rebound days for the Philadelphia 76ers and Phoenix Suns, but he still moves like an athlete. He makes a fluid backswing with his 6-iron, and smashes a shot in to the tarp. "I'm not sure if I'm dreaming this," Haney says. "You're crossing some major humps here, bud."

Those humps, as seen by millions on NBC's Lake Tahoe celebrity tournament telecast or YouTube—where even Tiger Woods does a spot-on impersonation—have to this point been golf instruction's Gordian Knot.

For the last decade, Barkley has been trapped in his own peculiar version of teacher-proof golf purgatory. Ten years ago, he was breaking 80 regularly with a home-made golf swing. Now, Barkley is a double-bogey golfer with an instantly recognizable—and lampoonable—signature move: The Pump Fake.

The 6-foot-5, 300-pound power gets to the top of his downswing, moves the club about a foot, then comes to a full stop again in a spasmodic hitch. He then bends dramatically at the waist before restarting his downswing in a wristy swipe at the ball, accompanied by a lurch backward. The suffering has been anything but private: In last year's Lake Tahoe celebrity event, where he finished last, Barkley beaned more spectators over the three days—two—than he made pars.

The screen captures on this page—taken from a now-famous YouTube video—don't come close to capturing Barkley's real-life awkwardness. "Charles' swing is the most recognizable swing in golf—and not in a good way," says Haney. "When you have a mess like he has, you're not going to fix it with a swing thought."

If the two days Haney and Barkley spent together in Dallas in November are any barometer, it's going to take dozens of drills, thousands of practice balls—1,500 over the two days—and an ample supply of extra-absorbent towels. The

Golf Channel is documenting the rebuilding process, from clubfitting to instruction sessions to Barkley's first forays out onto the course, for a new reality series called "Project Barkley with Hank Haney."

The latest Lake Tahoe disaster—Barkley's fourth consecutive last-place finish—prompted Woods to suggest that his friend and his teacher get together to try to rehab the Most Famous Hitch in Golf. Barkley was all for it—"It sucks getting ridiculed and humiliated," he says. Haney accepted the challenge as well, but as strange as it might sound, fixing the stall in Barkley's downswing wasn't a priority when constructing a six-month instruction plan.

"Charles has been to a bunch of teachers, and they have all focused on the hitch," says Haney. "He's never gotten any better, because everybody sees the hitch and immediately thinks, 'Fix the hitch, fix the hitch.' But the hitch is coming from something else."

That something else is physics. Barkley takes the club back on an extreme upright plane—so much that the shaft is on the same line as his spine at the top of his backswing. Looking down-range from behind, Barkley's club points at one o'clock. It should be pointing at 10:30. "From there, he's coming down at such a severe angle that if he doesn't do something, he's going to crash the club into the ground three feet behind the ball," says Haney. "He stops because he's attempting to make a correction. Honestly, the fact that he can hit the ball from that position shows what a great athlete he is."

Barkley started playing in the late 1980s, when he was at the height of his NBA powers in Philadelphia. Regular 36-hole matches with Philly sports anchor Neil Hartman shaved Barkley's handicap down to 10—a dangerous number for a player who routinely hit 320-yard tee shots and putted like a club champion. "By the time he got to Phoenix, in 1993, he was playing his best golf," says Hartman, who now anchors Comcast SportsNet's Sixers pre-game show. "I used to give him shots, and that summer, he just started kicking my ass. My wife told me I had to

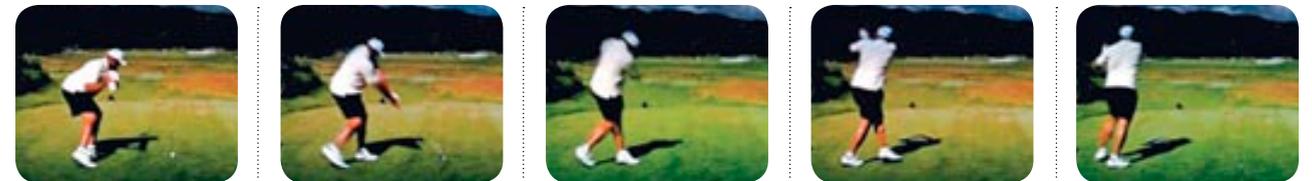


GOLF ACADEMY

In two days at the Hank Haney Golf Academy in November, Barkley hit 1,500 balls and watched hours of footage. Haney says he has only one other student, Tiger Woods, that works as hard on his game.



SEQUENCE: CREDIT GOES HERE





BOLD LEADIN HERE

A trip to Nike's tech center in Fort Worth was more than just a meet and greet. Haney and Barkley worked for two hours, and Barkley went through a complete fitting from putter to driver. The toll? Two shirts and 20 towels.

quit gambling, because it was like playing against the bank.”

But Barkley's self-taught swing started to deteriorate as he lost flexibility from the series of back and leg injuries that would eventually force him to retire from the NBA in 2000. A mild version of the hitch showed up in 1995, but Barkley was confident he could play his way out of it like he would a shooting slump on the court. “And that was my biggest mistake,” Barkley says. “One of the worst sayings is that practice makes perfect. That doesn't work if you're practicing the wrong stuff. I'd go out there and hit balls for six or eight hours, but I was doing all the wrong stuff.”

By the time Barkley and Haney hooked up, in early November of last year, what had started as a compensation for a steep backswing plane had morphed into full-blown full-swing yips. “The way I describe it, it's like driving your car to work on a certain route, day after day for years, and there's a stop sign you always stop for,” says Haney, who documented his own case of severe driver yips in the August 2004 issue of *Golf Digest*. “It's awfully hard to all of a sudden drive that same route, but do it without stopping at that sign.”

Barkley's confidence disappeared, and he wasn't sure if he could ever play golf in front of a crowd again—both out of embarrassment over the state of his game and concern for the spectators who lean over the ropes next to the tee to see the celebrities. “Everybody jokes about it, but it sucks to be on television and everybody making fun of you,” says Barkley, who is now TNT's lead NBA television analyst. “It sucks to stand up over

the ball and have no idea what's going to happen. I might shank the ball over here and hit this lady. I might whiff. And it's playing out in front of all these people.”

The reconstruction project isn't a private affair, either, with a half-dozen assorted Golf Channel cameramen and sound people following the process for six months and recording every shank and whiff for the series, which debuts in March. “I don't know how it's going to turn out,” says Barkley. “That's the beauty of the show. I've sucked for 10 years, so I'd be an idiot to think I'm going to get fixed in a short period of time. But I'm putting the time in every single day, golfwise. Even if it doesn't work, I can say I gave it my all.”

Haney marvels at Barkley's willingness to work—and look foolish on television, if necessary—to fix his swing. “He's wired to compete and get better,” says Haney. “A non-athlete couldn't do what he's doing. I've never had a student give the kind of effort he's giving, except for Tiger.”

Barkley is rebuilding his body at the same time he rehabs his swing, losing 30 pounds by the halfway point of the program and increasing his flexibility with a stretching regimen designed by a specialist who works with the NFL's Arizona Cardinals. “The first time we worked together, Hank was trying to get me behind the ball, and I just couldn't do it,” says Barkley. “First of all, I was fat. But my hamstrings were hurting. My groins were hurting. And when I turned, I thought my back was going to explode. Now I can do what he asks me to do without any pain.”

On this day, Haney is asking a lot. A range

‘IT SUCKS TO STAND UP OVER THE BALL AND HAVE NO IDEA WHAT WILL HAPPEN.’

attendant tees up 50 balls in a line, across the entire width of the practice area. Concentrating on one of three mechanical keys that underpin the lesson plan (see below), Barkley moves down the row hitting the balls with a driver, pausing only to shuffle his feet in place so he doesn't have time to think about the hitch.

Haney calls out instructions—“OK, now just the left hand” or “Keep your right arm on top”—and Barkley gets into a smooth, hitch-free rhythm. At the end of the row, Barkley is sweating through his shirt, and he straightens up to stretch his cranky back. He turns to look behind him, where the range attendant is just finishing another row of 50 balls and checking it with a string to make sure it's straight.

“Asshole,” he says with a pretend scowl, before the group dissolves into laughter.

Barkley has a career athlete's ability to absorb coaching. Haney uses a shaft to push Barkley's club flatter in the backswing, and on the next swing, he puts the club in the exact same position.

The bigger challenge will be taking the pieces he's learned over the first three months and

putting them together out on the course, when the score counts. “Basketball came natural for me,” says Barkley in between instruction sessions. “Coaches might give you a little something, but I knew I could throw a chest pass, a bounce pass or underhanded—whatever it took.

“In golf, you have to be in certain positions no matter what. That's where I'm trying to get to,” he says. “Hank's broken it down for me, but realistically, I can't think of three or four things at the same time. I hit five balls and think about one thing, then five more balls and think about the next thing. It's not natural yet, but I'll get there.”

The first real-world test came in a nine-hole round at Vacquero, outside Dallas. Barkley sprayed tee shots on the first two holes with noticeable hitches, but made two pars to finish after Haney held his head to remind him not to drop it through impact. “He might go out there and spray it a little bit, but he's on the right track,” says Haney. “His goal is to break 85 again, but that's not what I want. I want him to break 80 at Tahoe. I want him to play *golf*.”

Barkley certainly understands the stakes. “In basketball, I played with guys who who wouldn't take the big shot, and I'd get so frustrated with them,” he says. “No matter how many big shots I missed, I wanted it the next night. But now I know what it's like to not be able to do it—and not because you're scared. I want to get this right.”

And when he does?

“I made made a Top 10 list of the guys who made fun of me—Tiger's No. 1, and Michael Jordan is on there—and they better get ready.”



WORK AND PLAY

Just because you hit 1,500 balls a day doesn't mean there isn't time for fun. The cameras followed Barkley and Haney for barbecue on the road and pool and Monday Night Football at Haney's house outside Dallas.

WHAT WE'RE WORKING ON

BY HANK HANEY

Everybody knows about the hitch in Charles' swing, but to me, that's a symptom, not the problem. He had some basic flaws that made it almost impossible for him to get the ball airborne. If we could fix those problems, it would give Charles' swing an entirely new path—which would hopefully eliminate that hitch. We broke down the changes into three areas: Swing plane at the top of the backswing, head position, and hand position at address and impact. All of these things are designed to help give him more room to swing down through the ball with his arms extended and release the clubhead. He has a great handle on the fundamentals, now. The next job is to help him flow it together on the course and rebuild his confidence. Until he feels comfortable with the new move, the old one—with the hitch—will come back under the gun.



FLATTER BACKSWING To get Charles less steep at the top (left), we practiced left-handed swings (right) and used heavy clubs to help him feel the weight of the clubhead. Keeping his right arm above his left and the clubhead outside his hands early in the takeaway are big keys.



HEAD UP AND BACK FOR ROOM Charles tilted his head down and toward the target, which promoted that steep backswing and blocked him from making a good turn. I want his head up and behind the ball, and his eyes level. That way, he has more room to turn and swing on plane.



REAL RELEASE Charles used to play with a super strong grip, and the only way he could get it airborne was to block the clubface open (left). Now, his grip is neutral, and he's getting the back of his left hand turned at the target at impact (right), knuckles down, in a good release.



For more on Project Barkley: For more behind-the-scenes photographs and video of Barkley's swing, go to www.golfdigest.com/projectbarkley.