



Mark Teixeira
keeps his
priorities
straight even
when his
golf shots
aren't.

BY RAY TENNENBAUM

Photograph by Andrew Levine

First Things First

Being Mark Teixeira these days is tougher than you might think. It involves obsessive workouts five or six days a week; a strict gluten-, dairy-, and sugar-free diet; restorative therapeutic sessions of acupuncture, chiropractic, and steel-bar soft tissue manipulation. And even if adapting a deeply conservative nature to life in the Big Apple and fitting into the perpetual media frenzy that surrounds the New York Yankees somehow comes naturally to you—well, it still adds up to a lot of work.



Teixeira has been a consistently valuable asset for the Yankees since joining the club in 2009. Inset: Teixeira at Georgia Tech, where he was the regular third baseman.

So maybe it's not surprising Teixeira doesn't sweat his golf game. "I don't play enough to really work on my swing. I have a few swing keys, and since I'm only playing in the off-season, I just work on those keys and just play," he said as he relaxed on the veranda of the Burning Tree clubhouse in Greenwich last October, a week after the Yankees' season ended in a disappointing loss to the Houston Astros in the AL wild card game.

"For me, golf is very much a vacation, a way to get my mind off things for four hours of the day, a time to hang out with my friends and be outdoors. So, you know, when I'm playing golf—while I am competitive, and I want to play as well as I can—I definitely don't grind it out, 'cause I do that for nine months during the baseball season."

The dedication that has made him one of the game's most reliable performers has been in evidence practically since he was in the cradle. Born and raised near Baltimore, Mark was given his first baseball glove when he was one, and decided he was going to be a major-leaguer when he was five: his mother's brothers and father had been stand-out players, and his father had excelled for Navy.

Though Don Mattingly was Mark's favorite player, the Orioles' Eddie Murray fueled his desire

to switch-hit. After he batted .518 his senior year of high school and graduated 12th in his class, he decided he would attend college unless he was drafted in an early round. Prior to the 1998 draft, Teixeira and then-advisor Scott Boras received assurances from the Boston Red Sox that they would draft him in the first round. However, according to Teixeira and Boras, when he would not agree to a \$1.5 million bonus, the Sox let him slide – and apparently put the word out to other teams that he wanted to attend college, which explains why he wasn't drafted until the 9th round, by none other than the Red Sox. Disappointed, Teixeira decided to go to Georgia Tech.

Things worked out pretty well at Tech, where Teixeira earned the Dick Howser Trophy as the national collegiate baseball player of the year and was an Academic All-American in 2000. Drafted by the Texas Rangers with the fifth pick in 2001, he raced through the minor leagues and established himself as a major-league regular at age 23. In his first four seasons he averaged 35 homers and 112 RBIs, finishing fifth in the Rookie of the Year balloting, receiving MVP votes in two seasons, winning two Gold Gloves and two Silver Sluggers, and making one All-Star team. As his free agency drew

nearer, Texas traded him to Atlanta, who sent him along to the Los Angeles Angels. After the 2008 season he was free to sign with anybody, and he accepted a \$185 million, eight-year deal from the Yankees.

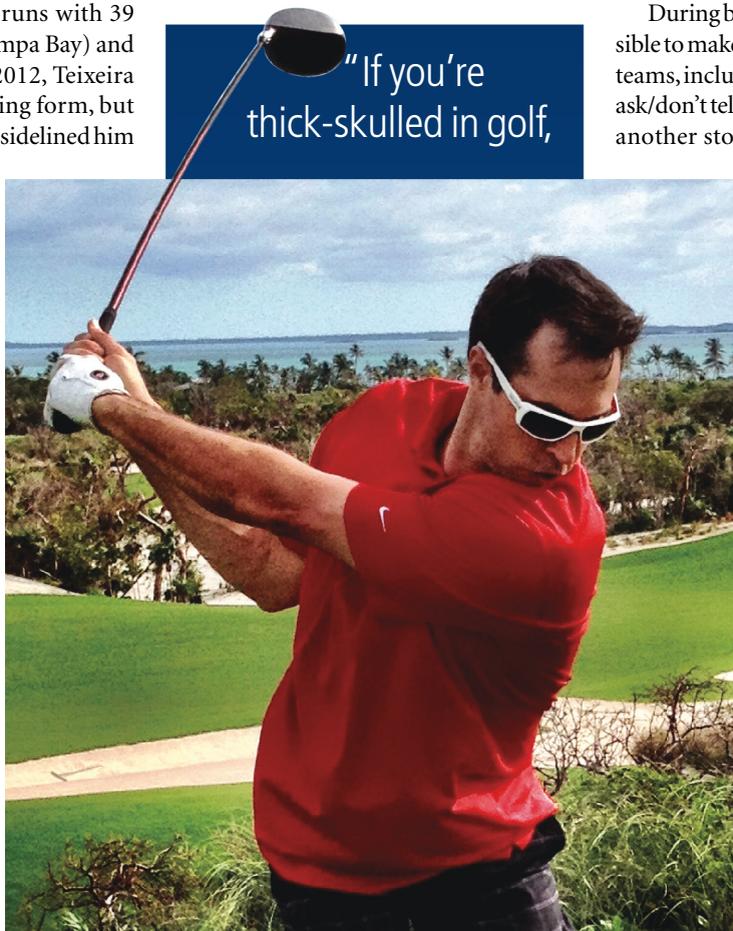
In 2009 he was a critical ingredient in the Yanks' World Championship, leading the American League in home runs with 39 (tied with Carlos Peña of Tampa Bay) and RBI with 122. From 2010–2012, Teixeira maintained his run-producing form, but health problems and injuries sidelined him much of the next two seasons; he returned to form in 2015 before fouling a ball off his shin in August, causing a hairline fracture that ended his season.

By nature analytical—a career-long asset—Tex is steadfastly matter-of-fact and unhesitating. Asked how he can maintain a 10 Handicap without really trying: “I understand that double bogeys and triples are out there, you know, that’s just going to happen during a round. It’s easier for me to get past a bad hole or two because it’s almost expected. Just like in baseball, I expect to strike out, I expect to make an out [sometimes] and not get the job done, and so it’s really about maximizing success. I don’t worry about the bad holes, but let’s make sure I par or birdie a few holes as well.”

For the young Mark Teixeira, golf started as a way to connect with his dad. “It was all about spending time together. Once I got to be 13 years old, my dad and I wanted to be active together and play sports together, but it’s a little bit tougher to play baseball or basketball or soccer with your dad at that age.” John “Tex” Teixeira had played a little golf, but father and son were both hackers in those days, with Mark employing “a half baseball swing” that served until he got to Georgia Tech.

At school he befriended some of the Yellow Jackets on the golf team, including Matt Kuchar and Bryce Molder, who Teixeira says helped him work on his form: “It’s not perfect, but at least it’s a real golf swing.” He’s not especially long (“people expect me to hit the ball 350 yards, but you know, 270 in

the fairway I’m very happy with”) and has to fight a tendency to revert to his batter’s instincts, especially off the tee: “My baseball swing is a back leg swing, so when you translate that to golf, that’s that high, up-and-away fade. So I have to really force myself to get to my front side so I can square the club



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—Mark Teixeira

up and turn the ball over.” The best part of his game is chipping and putting to compensate for a “terrible” mid-iron game.

Talking about the noteworthy personalities he’s enjoyed playing with gets him grinning. At Bakers Bay, a Discovery Land property in the Bahamas where he spends part of each winter, he partnered with head pro Cody Shining in a match against Graeme MacDowell and Baltimore Ravens owner Steve Bisciotti – only to lose, he confesses ruefully, thanks to his missed par putt on the 18th.

Another Baker’s Bay matchup was with Ray Romano (“hilarious”), and on a spring training outing when he was with the Braves, John Smoltz (“Shmoltzie’s a really good golfer, he loves playing”) challenged Tex, Tom Glavine, and Jeff Francoeur straight up against their best ball – and won.

During baseball season it’s nearly impossible to make time for a round, and on some teams, including the Yankees, golf is a don’t ask/don’t tell proposition. “Other teams, it’s another story, but bringing clubs on the road is frowned upon with the Yankees. If you’re going to go play golf, it’s fine, do what you want to do on your off day, but don’t be bringing your clubs in front of everyone on the plane.” Though he remembers a round at Pebble Beach where the Yankees were guests back in 2010, he is hard-pressed to think of another devoted golfer on the squad apart from Brian McCann and former teammate Andy Pettitte.

Asked to compare his mental approach to golf and baseball, he pauses to consider. “Sometimes you don’t have your driver that day, so you gotta break out the 3-wood or a hybrid. Some days your 56-degree wedge isn’t working, so use your 52 and open the club-face up a little bit. There’s ways that you manage the course.

“During a long baseball season, you have to manage different things—injuries, your approach versus a pitcher—you know, ‘This pitcher keeps beating me in; I’m not going to keep trying to hit the ball in. I’m gonna wait for an off-speed pitch and hit the ball away.’

“If you keep snap-hooking your drives the first six or seven holes, eventually you need to start making that adjustment and start hitting a different club off of the tee. If you’re thick-skulled in golf, your score at the end of the day is going to reflect that. Baseball’s the same way whether it’s during a game or during a season, if you’re thickheaded and don’t make the adjustments, your stats are going to suffer because of that.”

Making adjustments is something Teixeira’s done with notable success in the last



Teixeira takes a hands-on approach to supporting Harlem RBI, a youth development program that emphasizes baseball and academics.

few years. “It’s out of necessity. I mean, I want to be really, really good at everything I do, whether it’s playing golf, baseball—or Ping Pong with my kids—I want to be really, really good at it. I think the best athletes figure out ways to get the job done. And the ones that don’t make adjustments, the ones that don’t change their diet, change their workout, change their equipment, whatever it might be, when they need to—they’re the ones that end up being kind of forgotten about.”

His path took its most recent unexpected turn when he tore the tendon sheath in his right wrist early in the 2013 season. “My first ten years of my career were as good as I could ever have expected—very few injuries, tons of success, all the numbers I could have asked for—and when I got hurt, it just threw a complete wrench into everything. Your body starts feeling worse, your swing starts feeling bad. So [those] two years, 2013 and ’14, were a huge adjustment period. I made those adjustments [in 2015] and ended up having a great season.

“You see golfers do that, too. I follow the PGA Tour, and you see guys, they have a little tweak, something gets hurt, a little back injury or whatever, they miss time because they tore their knee up skiing, it’ll take them

a while to get back to it because you try to do the things you were doing before—they’re not working, so now you have to make the adjustments.

“That’s life, though. I love watching football, and it seems like every third play, someone goes off the field with an injury. Do you stop playing? Do you quit? No. You play, and if you’re injured you deal with it and you get back on the field when you’re healthy again.

“And that’s kind of the way life is, you’re going to get knocked down, you’re going to fail, you’re not going to get the promotion, you’re not going to get into the school that you want to get into—so you dust yourself off and keep trying.”

Many things bind Teixeira to the Met Area: his kids’ schools, his affection for Broadway and the glitter of New York City (fans who enjoyed his “Entourage” cameo a few years ago will be able to see him make a guest appearance in Showtime’s “Billions” this season), his charity work on behalf of Harlem RBI, a youth development program centered in Harlem and the South Bronx. If he chooses to pursue opportunities in television, he’s certainly in the right place.

He isn’t shy about talking about the Met Area golf courses he’d like to play. Though his hands-down favorite is Shinnecock

Hills, he acknowledges his work is cut out for him. “I don’t get to play a lot around here, I still need to play Pine Valley, I still need to play Winged Foot, Bethpage Black.” Taking the time for golf is one of several factors mitigating the bittersweet prospect of retirement. “When I’m done playing baseball, which is anywhere from one to five years from now, I’m going to play a lot of golf. I’m definitely going to want to get a low single-digit handicap and actually work on my game.... I also want to go out and play all the [great] courses not only in the metro New York area, but also around the world.”

Family is, once again, foremost. Just as he’s enjoyed the game through the years with his father, who’s “actually gotten pretty good, he’s retired now and he plays a lot of golf, I still have to give him some strokes”—he looks forward to sharing the game with his three children, two of whom are old enough to take lessons at Burning Tree, and his wife, Leigh. “That’s why I want my kids to play golf—I mean, if my kids play no other sports but golf, I’d be happy because it means once a week or once a month I get 4–5 hours with ’em: just us on a beautiful course with nature.”

He sure looks like he’s found the sweet spot. ■