

Tour Pros vs Amateurs: What Truly Sets Us Apart?

By Jonathon Fleming

Stand on any practice range at a Tour event, and it's easy to get lost in the visual spectacle of it all. The driving range is filled with players smashing long drives, striking crisp irons, and making the game look deceptively easy. In fact, you could easily mistake a top amateur for a Tour pro, especially when watching them hit ball after ball with precision. But dig a little deeper, and the subtle but significant differences become apparent. Why is it that these professionals, who might not look much different from a skilled amateur on the range, are so much better on the course?

Driving Distance: Not as Wide a Gap as You Think

One of the first areas you might expect Tour pros to dominate is driving distance. But the numbers may surprise you. The average driving distance on the PGA Tour is around 290 yards, which, while impressive, isn't the 350-yard bombs you might expect from watching TV coverage. Only about 20% of pros hit it that far. In fact, a player like David Toms averaged just 270 yards off the tee and still managed to win 13 PGA Tour events, including a major.

For a decent amateur, a drive of 250 yards isn't unusual. While the courses Tour players compete on are significantly longer, the actual distance they face on approach shots is somewhat comparable to what a club golfer might encounter. The average Tour player hits approach shots from around 170 yards—again, not far off from what a skilled amateur might face. So, off the tee and into the green, we're not worlds apart from the pros. But what happens next is where the real separation occurs.

Approach Shots: Consistency Is Key

Tour pros are surgical when it comes to approach shots. On average, they hit 12 greens in regulation per round. That might not seem out of reach for a skilled amateur—there are plenty of rounds where you might hit a dozen greens yourself. However, it's what the pros do when they hit those greens that makes the difference. For every green they hit, they gain about 0.25 shots on the field. That translates to a birdie for every four greens in regulation—a consistency that amateurs can struggle to maintain.

Scrambling: The Art of Recovery

This is one of the biggest areas where Tour pros shine. Even when they miss greens, their ability to get up and down is remarkable. The best players on Tour average a scrambling success rate in the high 70% range. That means more than three-quarters of the time, they save par after missing the green. This isn't just about technical skill—it's about experience and course management. Pros know exactly where to miss to give themselves the best chance at a simple recovery, rarely leaving themselves short-sided with impossible chips.

Putting: A Game-Changer

If there's one part of the game where pros really pull away from amateurs, it's on the greens. From six feet and in, Tour players make around 70% of their putts. This reliability under pressure takes a huge amount of strain off the rest of their game, allowing them to approach the green knowing they can rely on their putting. For many amateurs, this is where rounds can unravel. A missed short putt here, a three-putt there, and suddenly the scorecard is littered with bogeys.

Pros understand that putting is where tournaments are won and lost, and they dedicate an enormous amount of practice time to perfecting this aspect of their game. It's the difference between a top-10 finish and missing the cut by a single stroke.

Unforced Errors: Minimizing the Damage

One of the most significant differences between Tour pros and amateurs is their ability to avoid big numbers. Pros rarely make triple bogeys or worse because they've mastered the art of damage control. After a bad shot, they tend to follow it up with a great one, limiting the damage to a bogey at worst. Amateurs, on the other hand, often let one mistake spiral into several, resulting in those dreaded "blow-up holes" that ruin rounds.

This ability to avoid big mistakes isn't just about physical skill. It's about experience, mental toughness, and playing enough golf to know how to recover when things go wrong.

Conclusion: Time, Practice, and the Short Game

For a better-than-average amateur, shooting under par is entirely possible. But the key difference between an 8-handicapper and a Tour pro comes down to consistency. Tour players spend hours refining their short game, practicing more and playing more golf. As a result, they make fewer mistakes, capitalize on more birdie opportunities, and save par far more often than their amateur counterparts.

Ultimately, the "art of scoring" isn't just about hitting it long or sticking it close—it's about knowing how to recover, managing the course effectively, and putting with unwavering confidence. For amateurs looking to bridge the gap, focusing on these areas could be the key to unlocking lower scores.