



# Eye on the rings

**The student:**  
Alexandre Rocha



**Birthplace:** São Paulo, Brazil  
**Age:** 34  
**Height:** 6 feet  
**Weight:** 176 pounds  
**Notable achievements:** T-20, 2011

Children's Miracle Network Hospitals Classic; two-time Brazilian Amateur champion (1994, '97); medalist, 2006 European Tour Q-School; two-time All-American at Mississippi State (first team in 2000); won 2001 Chilean Masters; winner of five college titles and seven South American professional events.

**What's in the bag:** TaylorMade R11 driver (9 degree); TaylorMade R11 3-wood (13 degree); TaylorMade R11 Rescue (17 degree); TaylorMade Tour Preferred CB Forged irons (3-5); TaylorMade Tour Preferred MC Forged irons (6-PW); TaylorMade Z-TP wedges (54 and 60 degree); TaylorMade Ghost TM-770 Tour putter; TaylorMade Penta ball.

**The teacher:**  
Jason Birnbaum



**Age:** 31  
**Title:** Teaching professional, Alpine Country Club, Demarest, N.J.  
**Notable student:** Jim McGovern

## BRAZIL'S ROCHA REMAKES HIS GAME WITH A FOCUS ON '16 RIO OLYMPICS

By **Sean Martin**  
Winter Garden, Fla.

**We won't know until well after the** 2016 Olympics the full impact that golf's inclusion will have on the sport's global growth, but this much is certain: The prospect of competing for gold has resurrected one professional's career.

Alexandre Rocha was contemplating his future in golf toward the end of the 2009 PGA European Tour season, during which he earned only 47,935 euros and lost his card.

"I didn't want to play golf anymore," Rocha said. "I was in a horrible place. I just didn't have a clue what to do."

Then the announcement came in August of that year that golf would be added to the Olympic program in the 2016 Games at Rio de Janeiro. Rocha, who grew up in São Paulo, Brazil, was energized by the prospect of competing for a medal in his homeland.

"It was a wake-up call and a sign," Rocha said. "Here's an opportunity to play the greatest sporting event, in your home country, and it's in

a few years' time."

The next month, Rocha reunited with his former instructor, Jason Birnbaum, and they formed a plan for 2010 that was centered around getting his game to peak for PGA Tour Q-School.

Rocha played sparingly that year, as he and Birnbaum re-worked his swing. The plan paid off, as Rocha finished 22nd at Q-School finals in December 2010 to earn his first PGA Tour card. He finished 184th on the money list after making 11 cuts and posting only one top 25 in his 22 Tour starts as a rookie, but ended the season on a strong note by tying for 26th and 20th, respectively, in his last two Fall Series starts. He then tied for 24th at 2011 Q-School to earn a return trip to the Tour for his sophomore season in 2012.

A player's focus is usually on keeping his Tour card, but Rocha still is looking four years down the road.

"It takes the pressure off, because we're going to focus on 2016," Rocha said. "There's a long way to get there, so I can take the process little by little and try to improve."

**'Here's an opportunity to play the greatest sporting event, in your home country, and it's in a few years' time.'**

— Alexandre Rocha

**Good:** Standing tall



GOLFWEEK PHOTOS/TRACY WILCOX PHOTOGRAPHED AT ORANGE COUNTY NATIONAL IN WINTER GARDEN, FLA.

## Address: Proper posture

Fixing a player's address often is the first step in fixing a swing. Rocha used to be too hunched over, had too much weight on his toes and extended his shoulders beyond his toes. This made it difficult for him to swing the club back properly. He now goes through a three-step process to ensure that he addresses the ball properly.

First, he stands tall, with his hands at his side. This allows him to check that he is properly aligned. He then holds the club perpendicular to the ground, squats slightly and bends his knees. He completes his address by bending at the hips and placing the club on the ground.

"His back is straighter and more upright," Birnbaum said. "This helped his arms and hands swing in front of his body. With his old posture, he had nowhere to go but inside because everything started outside."

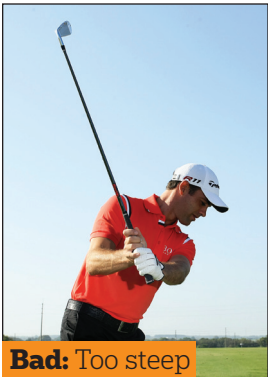
**Bad:** Slumped over





# Backswing: Back on plane

Rocha used to take the club too far inside, causing an excessively steep shaft plane on the backswing. He performs two drills on practice swings to fix this fault.



**Bad:** Too steep

>> He holds an alignment stick against the grip of his club so that the stick extends beyond the club's shaft. He wants the stick to point at his target line when the club is perpendicular to the ground.

>> He presses his right index finger against the butt of the club. This force against the club's end helps him take the club back properly instead of dragging inside the target line.

Rocha also has two swing thoughts to help him swing on the proper plane. He tries to get the butt end of the club pointing at the target line as soon as possible. He also likes to imagine that the clubhead is a 10-pound weight.

"He feels the weight of the clubhead swing around his body," Birnbaum said. "His hands and arms feel loose and soft. Having lots of tension caused him to yank the club inside."



*In this drill, Rocha tries to point the alignment stick at the target line.*



*In this one, Rocha uses his right index finger to help guide the club back on the proper plane.*

# Downswing: High tee, flatter swing to improve club position

Rocha's downswing used to be too steep. To teach him to flatten the shaft during the downswing, Birnbaum had Rocha hit mid-iron shots with a ball that was teed up at driver height.

At address, Rocha hovered the club

above the ground, which helped him swing the club on a flatter plane in the backswing. He had to swing on a similar plane on the downswing in order to make solid contact with the ball.

"Because I went back steep and shut,

I would come down steep and shut," Rocha said.

"So I had to really hold the club square and lift my body up to keep the ball from going left. If I would release it, I would hit it miles left."



# Short game: In the zone

Just hitting the green with a lengthy pitch shot is an accomplishment for some amateurs. Professionals must be much more precise. Birnbaum and Rocha used alignment sticks to help Rocha pick "zones" at which to hit pitches. Birnbaum would place an alignment stick next to the hole to help Rocha focus on a specific section of the green.

In the photo, Birnbaum does not want Rocha to hit his pitch right of the hole because he'd have a difficult, downhill putt. A few feet right of the hole is acceptable because the putt would be short. The stick helps Rocha focus on keeping the ball in the zone to the left of the stick.

**Good:** Putter stays left



**Bad:** Putter swings right



# Putting: No push

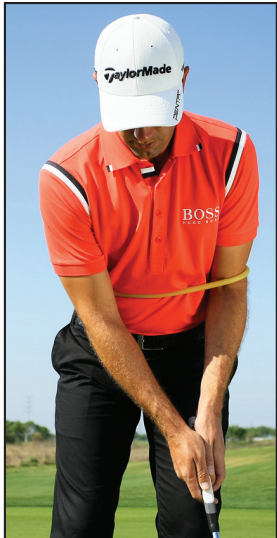
Rocha used to aim left of the hole and "push" his putts toward the hole.

"He held on to it, instead of releasing it. He aimed left and blocked putts to the target," Birnbaum said. "His left arm tended to swing away from his body. He'd have good connection, but then have too much space (between his left arm and body)."

To fix this, Birnbaum tied a bungee cord around Rocha's left arm and body (inset photo) to help Rocha feel the putter "release" through the ball.

"The cord keeps his left arm close to his body," Birnbaum said.

Rocha also places an alignment stick outside the ball (far left) to monitor his clubhead path. His putter used to work outside the stick (near left) after impact. It now works to the inside.



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