

COLLABORATE

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Proponent Group Merges with Golf Channel Academy: New Era in Marketing Instruction Begins, Proponent Members to Benefit

At Proponent Group's annual Summit earlier this month in Orlando, Proponent Group's President Lorin Anderson announced that Proponent Group would be merging its resources with Golf Channel Academy while continuing operations under the Proponent Group brand. Golf Channel Academy is a new entity providing turnkey marketing solutions for high-quality golf instructors throughout North America.

"This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Proponent Group to have the catbird seat to help steer the golf instruction industry forward," explained Anderson. "All of the marketing, public relations and business best practices we educate our members about will be available through Golf Channel Academy. For those members who do not align their businesses directly with Golf Channel Academy, they will benefit from the numerous new resources Proponent Group will have at our disposal."

This was a strategic business decision according to Anderson, who had consulted for Golf Channel Academy's founders for the past 18 months and through that process saw the opportunity for Proponent Group members to benefit. He saw a perfect dovetail between the educational offerings Proponent Group has been providing for the game's top teachers and the business services and marketing and promotion heft that Golf Channel Academy has assembled.

Golf Channel Academy coaches will benefit from a wide spectrum of business consulting services and products addressing market-



Golf Channel President Mike McCarley speaks at the Summit's opening dinner.

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PROPONENT GROUP NEWS

Golf Channel Academy Merger Provides New Resources; Arccos and JR Mats Newest Partners

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ing, sales, technology and back-office solutions needs, as well as shared best-practices across the network. Golf Channel Academy coaches also will have the opportunity to appear on instructional programming across Golf Channel's television and digital platforms.

Instructors in the Golf Channel Academy network will maintain their current brand, but will also be able to leverage the Golf Channel Academy brand at the same time.

Proponent Group members will benefit in many ways from this merger. A few examples include:

- As Golf Channel Academy builds their North American footprint over the next few years, Proponent Group members will have priority access to being considered for a location in their home market.
- Proponent Group members will also have priority status for filling open positions at Golf Channel Academy facilities with these positions posted exclusively to Proponent Group's job board.
- Best practices learned from Golf Channel Academy's proprietary research and business analysis will also be shared with Proponent Group members on a regular basis as will various Golf Channel business leaders at Proponent's educational events.

Proponent Group members who attended the Summit received a detailed package about how Golf Channel Academy will operate. If you would like a copy of this information, please email landerson@proponent-group.com.



From Left: Lorin Anderson, Proponent Group President; Scott Novell, Golf Channel Academy President; Todd Wilson, Golf Channel Academy CEO and Mike McCarley, Golf Channel President at the announcement on Nov. 2nd.

Arccos and JR Mats on Board as Partners

Arccos, the game's first ever, real-time GPS and Stat Tracking system, and **JR Mats**, creator of Real Feel Golfmats, are both now on board as Proponent Group Partners.

Arccos is the easiest way to improve your game. The system pairs a sensor to each club in your bag then sends shot data to the Arccos app



ARCCOS

which you download on your smartphone. Your game stats appear in realtime on the app. Visit arccosgolf.com for more information.

JR Mats is a premier manufacturer of golf mats and is well known for its Real Feel line that lets you swing down and through with true divot action for more realistic practice. The product is used by numerous top golf facilities worldwide.

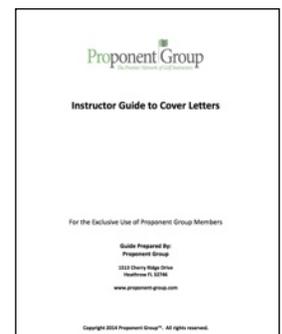


New Guide and Template Added to Member Site

The members' website has two new documents this month: One designed to protect you from liability, the other to prepare you for the intricacies of the job hunt.

Our **Instructor Guide to Cover Letters** is now available on the members website in The Job Search menu. This guide shows you the steps for taking a blank sheet of paper and transforming it into a persuasive, attention-getting cover letter. This document explains critical elements including: The 5 Basics of Letter Writing, due diligence on the position, pacing the letter and creating the proper voice.

Also added to the members site is an **Adult Student Release - Medical Waiver Form**. This form provides a basic student consent and medical waiver/information form for any adult who participates in a program at your facility. A **Parental Release - Medical Waiver Form** is already on the site.



A LETTER FROM YOUR PRESIDENT

Golf Channel Academy Could Be a Game-Changer



This year's Summit is in the books and there is a lot to feel inspired about. I'll begin by saying I couldn't be more excited about Proponent Group's merger with Golf Channel Academy. After seven years of steady membership and benefit growth, the timing is ideal to infuse Proponent with access to the world-class marketing and business resources that Golf Channel delivers. For example, in our panel-led mar-

keting workshops, we tapped the expertise of the network's creative director and its head of digital marketing and social media. Their insights were on a level you probably could not duplicate in this industry.

Proponent Group will have access to Golf Channel experts from a wide array of specialties as we move forward. There is a pivot occurring in our industry. Instruction has been overwhelmed by the vast marketing budgets of equipment manufacturers. In 2013, more than \$600 million was spent to promote sales of golf equipment. Best estimates suggest that national marketing of golf instruction totaled a puny one percent of that \$600 million. This helps explain why so many \$400 dollar drivers were sold over the years. It also points to a reason why—according to the NGF—only 11 percent of golfers took a lesson last year.

When I first heard the Golf Channel Academy concept I was struck by its potential. I could see a lot of water being poured on instruction's bone-dry marketing sponge. For the first time in my career, it seemed possible to move the needle toward a scenario in which more golfers were choosing to spend time with an instructor.

Since I was first approached more than 18 months ago about this project, it has evolved into much more than a

promotional vehicle for boosting interest in golf lessons. For the Proponent member, opportunities will be many. This is a job-creation engine for golf coaching—the first one to come along in many years. If you are a Proponent member seeking to open your own academy, you will have a unique source of assistance and guidance. Whatever the career decisions that face a Proponent Group member, the emergence of GCA means your professional move will be supported by a trove of exclusive data and metrics.

As I have studied this project, I've thought long and hard about what would be best for our members. My purpose all along has been to build an organization that you would be proud of. The mission has been to support the industry in general while always looking for ways to put our members at the cutting edge of the coaching world.

I believe Proponent Group could not have found a better opportunity to continue pursuing those ideals. Golf Channel Academy is an idea whose time has come. Hundreds of other industries have developed marketing platforms to elevate the small businesses that populate their sector of the economy. We fully expect to do just that for high-quality golf coaches who want access to a marketing matrix developed by the largest media brand in the game.

While becoming a Golf Channel Academy location is not going to be for every Proponent member, the level of service we will be able to provide to all members will spike upwards. Given this access to additional resources and manpower we can be sure to continue delivering the benefits you've come to expect and to expand our offerings in the future.

We're just in the first mile of this marathon and it will take time for the pieces to all come together. But be assured this new era for Proponent Group will be highly beneficial to all of our members.

Proponent Group Partners



SUMMIT WRAP-UP

Grow Your Business, Grow the Game Orlando Summit Dominated by Marketing Workshops, Historic Merger Agreement

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Attendees at last week's Proponent Group Summit could rightly feel they were gathered at the epicenter of coaching, training and business development for golf professionals. The 125 members who came to Orlando dove into an array of activities to enrich their coaching skills, build profits and up their enjoyment level. Starting things off on Monday morning was a brilliant and highly detailed exposition of how golf coaching can approach a level of mastery. It was presented to the group by Proponent member Cameron McCormick, best known for his success training PGA Tour star Jordan Spieth. Based on McCormick's thoughts on creating and building the coach-golfer relationship, he is much more than that—call him a technician and even a scholar of the golf-improvement process.

Relationship-building was consistently at the core of what presenters and question-attendees discussed. Ian James, CEO of Retail Tribe, was passionate in urging the audience to understand the effect each of them has, personally and directly, on golfers. From these high-touch relationships a stronger business is built for whatever golf facility is fortunate enough to have a difference-maker on the lesson tee guiding new and experienced golfers.

Even sponsor presentations brought heavy emphasis to the power of the relationship, making it a story of long-term mentorship rather than the daily grind of give-a-lesson, take-a-lesson. Edufii CEO

Spencer Dennis took a quick trip through the latest tools and gadgets available in the company's digital tracking

and storing solution, outlining a vision of how seamlessly the relevant material can be posted, organized, retrieved, archived and shared. The result, as Dennis depicted it, is an elegant system for maintaining contact and optimizing the talents of both coach and player.

Monday's outdoor session at the Mike Bender Golf Academy was a tour de force of tactical training and student engagement, thanks to the energy and excellence of Martin Hall, Gale Peterson and host professional Mike Bender. In Hall's 90-minute chipping-instruction clinic, the renowned Englishman revealed a life's work devoted to diagnostics, drills and the fine art of understanding what a student needs, wants, aspires to—and can handle. When the applause for Martin's presentation on the greenside chip died down, the group carted folding chairs to the range side of Bender's enviable academy building for a "faults and fixes" session based on insightful questions submitted by Associate Members of Proponent.

"Come for the networking" was a phrase used often to promote this Summit. To see how Peterson, Bender and



Martin Hall, one of the most creative teachers in the game, shared with fellow members his bag of short game tricks.

Hall responded to fault-fix questions revealed a telling fact about networking's power—these premier teachers, it turns out, have been using each other's drills and tactics for years. The question about early release and "flipping" the club on the forward swing elicited multiple cure suggestions from the three National Teachers of the Year, including excellent tactics that each had long ago copied from one or both of the other two, and employed often when the situation required. Teaching aids and hand-built implements were part of the arsenal, but just as intriguing were the phrases and body-position ideas these three teachers demonstrated.

On a fine, sunlit Florida day, the largest and most diverse demo-day event at a Proponent Summit followed the live-lesson experience. Members had to move at a steady pace to hit all 17 of the demo tents and technology exhibits, some of which were setup in the Bender Academy video rooms. As a bonus, attendees could choose to take

part in an AimPoint Clinic with no less an expert than Aimpoint founder Mark Sweeney as the tutor.

Summits always begin with a Sunday reception and dinner—this one having a particularly momentous feel to it. The camaraderie and shared enthusiasm that mark any kickoff dinner was evident, punctuated by what most would call a historic announcement—not just for Proponent Group but for the business of teaching.

With Golf Channel President Mike McCarley and a large contingent from the network's management group on hand, Proponent Group was welcomed into the Golf Channel fold as an operating subsidiary of this industry's most visible organization. (See page 1 for further details on the Proponent Group merger with Golf Channel Academy.) As stated in the Nov. 6 email from Lorin Anderson to Proponent members, a strategic alliance between Golf Channel, the new Golf Channel Academy (rebranded from Golf Coach Select even before GCS launched) and Proponent Group

Member Networking a Prominent Feature of Summit '14



Clockwise from Top Left: Bernie Najar (left) and Dom DiJulia in conversation. Martin Hall shakes hands with Golf Channel Academy CEO, Todd Wilson as Golf Channel President Mike McCarley looks on. Heathrow Country Club's Director of Instruction Chris Holmes listens to Lisa Hall, former LPGA Tour Rookie of the Year. Sheryl Maize, a regular attendee at Proponent Group Summits, catches up with friends at the opening dinner.

Nearly 20 Companies Participating Made this Our Biggest Demo Day Ever



Clockwise from Top Left: Arccos and TrackMan were on the main tee for this year's demo day. They were among 17 companies attending this year's Summit Demo Day. Members checked out a variety of short game training aids on the pitching green. Spencer Dennis from Edufii explains how their cloud-based software can save you time and accelerate your student's improvement. Jeff Ritter demos MobiCoach's live remote lesson capabilities.

symbolizes the fast pace of change in the coaching-training segment of an otherwise lethargic golf industry.

A group of 16 charter members were announced and the Proponent members who were present came up in person to accept decorative plates with their new status etched into the glass. As Anderson explained, these early entrants into the GCA network were chosen in part for the quality and size of their operations and also to fulfill the geographic distribution that was fundamental to this phase of the business plan.

"Our charter Golf Channel Academy sites effectively 'seed' the network with qualified academies across a very wide and deep swath of the continental U.S.," Lorin said. As the build-out continues, this designation and partnership that "for a variety of reasons is not for everyone" in the Proponent Group membership, at least as their businesses are currently configured, would be worked out with more golf academies and teaching centers, many of them Proponent-affiliated.

"It's important to point out that this merger is not a 'takeover' of Proponent Group," Lorin told the summit audience. "What we're going to be able to accomplish together as GCA with Proponent as a continuing force is much more than Proponent by itself could have hoped to do," he said.

Todd Wilson, CEO of the new Golf Channel Academy organization, ran down a list of advantages that the combination of Golf Channel, Proponent and the new entity would possess. "We will market and advertise golf teaching and coaching as it rightly should be," Wilson said. "This is the first opening there has ever been to elevate instruction to its rightful place in the industry and in the minds of consumers."

Among the benefits to both Golf Channel and the enrolled academies is use of these coaches on Golf Channel network and online instruction shows. Folders with a 14-page business-plan summary were distributed to the attendees, filling in all the important details. Company opera-

tions won't actively launch until spring of 2015. "This is a brand-within-a-brand structure," Wilson said. "Individual academy operations can and should retain their 'star quality.'"

The golfer email list that Golf Channel has built through its GolfNow tee reservation system is substantial to say the least. "In Phoenix alone that database has 300,000 names," pointed out Scott Novell — a co-

founder and president of Golf Channel Academy. "An academy in Phoenix, on its own, could rent that list for email marketing efforts but the cost would be \$30,000 a year or more." As a Golf Channel Academy facility, that asset would be part of the benefit package.

McCarley took the podium to introduce himself to Proponent members as he saluted the new venture and partnership. The personable Golf Channel CEO spoke from his unique perspective about coaching and player development. He noted that while golf instruction is and has been a cornerstone of Golf Channel's programming, the nature of it was different from what the teaching professional does each day. "The way we present golf instruction on TV, it is one person connecting with many," said McCarley. "The way you people do it, it's an individual connecting directly with an individual. That's a whole different experience."

Within its corporate mission, Golf Channel puts a strong emphasis on "connecting the world to golf." In some ways—as all industry people understand—that's a heavy lift, since a lot of the world is non-golfers with no particular inclination toward the game. Strategically, the formation of a Golf Channel Academy business that is on-the-ground dovetails



Once again the room was packed with more than 120 Proponent Group members in attendance.

well with the on-air instruction programming and with Golf Channel's fast-growing GolfNow online service, led by a tee-time reservation solution but bolstered by other benefits to golfers and golf facilities.

One striking benefit of the merger was the panel-session input from Carolina Castaneda, Golf Channel's director of digital marketing, and David Piccolo, who is vice-president

and creative director of the network. Tuesday's summit agenda was a roll-up-your-sleeves marketing and social media workshop. Everything from websites to logos to email promotion to effective uses of Twitter, Facebook and other soc-med platforms was studied in detail, with members offering their own content as works in progress that might benefit from peer and expert commentary. Castaneda's mastery of social media and its fast-changing trends bordered on astounding. Piccolo's assured and on-target commentary on the small-business approach to brand-building was highly welcome, as well. These two accomplished professionals, who clearly warmed to the spirit of the summit, were given the OK on quite short notice by Golf Channel leadership.

Preceding the workshop session on marketing was a panel presentation on how to make sure your contract or agreement letter adequately protects you, plus ideas on "managing your manager" day to day. One of the industry's leading public-relations executives, Karen Moraghan, teamed with legal expert Scott Novell and Proponent staff editor David Gould to come at the topic from multiple angles. Once again, the power of relationship-building and nurturing these ties was an obvious theme.



Cameron McCormick's Journey to High Performance got high marks from participants.

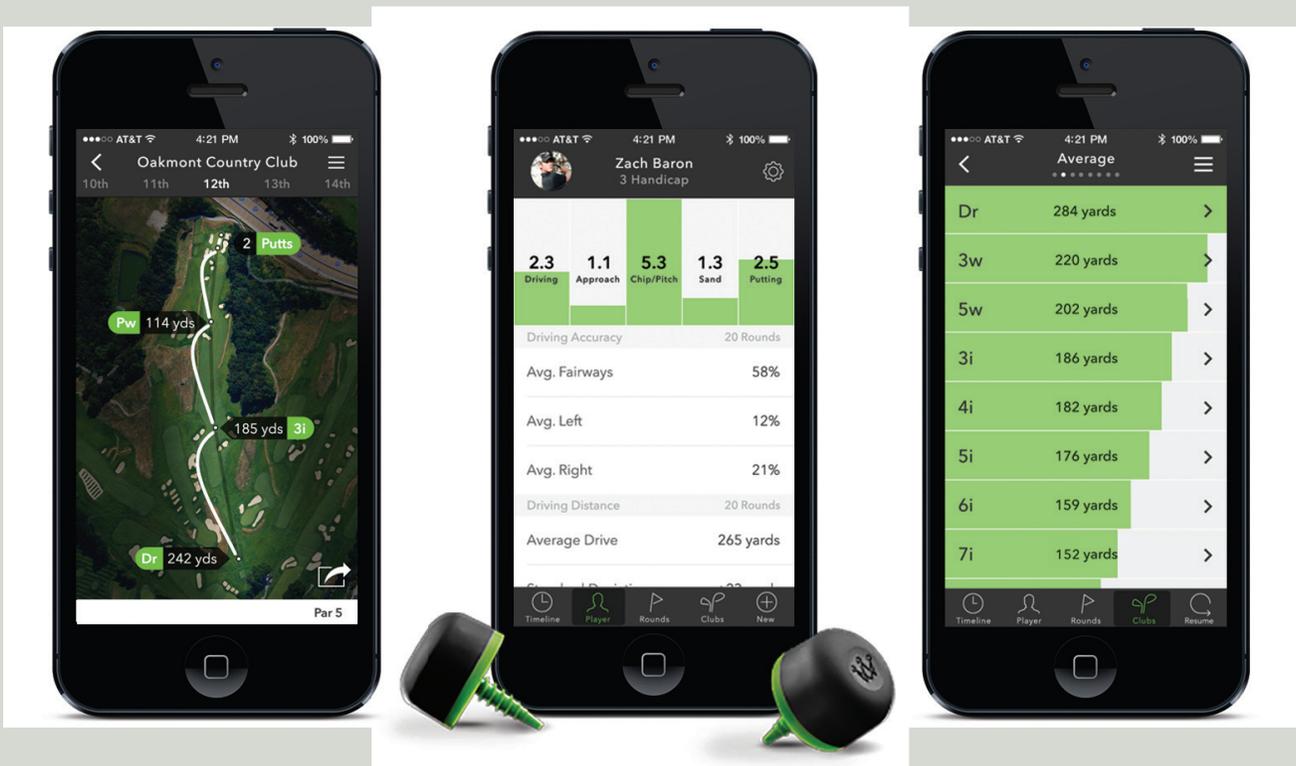
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New Avenues to a Searchable Presence Online

New commercial websites with instructor profile pages have joined the PGA and LPGA sites as searchable resources for golfers. Will these sites turn into business-builders?

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Here's a surefire way to win a bet with a non-golf person: Claim that you already know the five-word answer an instructor will give when asked: "How do you bring in new students?" Your bet is that the teacher will say, "Mostly by word of mouth." That is pretty much universal, mainly because word-of-mouth has driven a lot of business through the decades. We get that golf is a social game and we've seen how word travels fast about the quality of a course, a new putter on the market or a local instructor.

And yet the effect of the Internet on word-of-mouth must now be reckoned with. Alex Weber, co-founder of the startup website GolfMDs.com, summarizes this new normal with a single declarative statement: "All searches begin online."

His assertion has some merit. GolfMDs.com was launched in 2013 in part because golf instruction had no Angie's List or Yelp.com as a digital means of peer-to-peer, word-of-mouth commentary. The closest the Internet had come to a searchable database of golf instructors is what you find at PGA.com and LPGA.com. These were natural sub-pages for the two organizations to construct, given the contact data they started with. And each of them does rank very high in Google searches based on phrases like "find a golf instructor" or "find a female instructor."

By their nature, however, the PGA and LPGA sites have a static quality. GolfMDs.com—and now the more recent startup in this category, Swaggle.com—move beyond the passive format of geographic listing and try to create a win-win for golfers and teachers alike. For these commercial sites, large volumes of traffic and the engagement of the golfers who visit are the formula for success—it's about delivering a satisfying user experience and helping golfers in great numbers solve their various problems.

That starts with building a national database of teachers, each showcased on profile pages that are chock full of specific information. Backing up the profiles are objective reviews by golfers who have actually worked with the particular coach. It should be said that one function of these services is a booking engine (with a secure-payment tool) and it's the gateway through which a golfer gets access to add their review.

That seems important. In these times of merchant protest against Yelp.com and its tendency to bruise reputations using a seemingly irresponsible process, no startup wants to antagonize what would be the core asset. Colton Bollinger, a principal in Swaggle.com, which went live in July, says golf lesson-takers seem to be different from, say, those people



GolfMDs is quickly ramping up their website to include detailed search functions for all teaching pros.

who stay in budget motels and get satisfaction from writing long, scolding reviews of them. "The one statistic that has stood out to me is that out of all our instructor reviews to date, 99.5 percent have been positive reviews with a 5-star rating. The remaining half-a-percent were 4-star ratings," says Bollinger. He acknowledges that the sample size—about 3,000 lessons so far booked through Swaggle—is small. His point is that existing students will tend to be raving fans, and their observations will hold a lot of weight because they are based on specifics and cover a fairly long arc of time. But there's another influence to consider: In general, going for golf lessons is more uplifting and fun than having a

plumber replace your bathroom toilet. As a result, the word-of-mouth online for lessons could and should have a different flavor than other review sites.

This brings up the matter of testimonials appearing on the teacher's personal website. Weber sees only minor effects from them. "For starters, the number of eyeballs those testimonials reach is very small," he says. "But mainly it's a matter of consumers not seeing real credibility in them, because they know the comments can be filtered and edited by the person who owns the site."

The founders of Swaggle and GolfMDs each speak emphatically about instruction's untapped potential to grow as an industry and in some ways carry golf on its back as the game seeks to serve more people. "The golf equipment sector markets in a massive, constant way—instruction doesn't, at least not so far," says Weber. "Meanwhile instruction has more potential to affect the business. All that's needed is to bring together the loose collection of teaching professionals onto a single platform." Consumers are consumers, in his view, and their interest in working with a golf coach is currently impeded.

"Think about it—people are looking online for someone they are going to marry," Weber says. "They use Internet search for everything else, too, as long as its organized so they can compare and contrast, look at photos and video, read reviews. That's absent for golf." Nor is it for lack of interest, he hastens to add. "Only 12 to 15 percent of golfers take any lessons," notes Weber, "but over 80 percent are interested in taking lessons—then there are those 10 million Americans with so-called latent interest in the game. They need a compass to navigate by."

Use of smartphones is habitual and habit-forming, that's pretty obvious. Among people who study trends in mobile technology, there is great power to the seamless way in which an idea or a wish triggers a handheld search, then the reading of peer comments, then quickly leads to some type of purchase. "The emergence of mobile tech and social media are intertwined," says Kevin Benedict of the global analytics firm Cognizant. "The two phenomena will continue to play off each other." Unless people like Benedict are wrong, the effect of TripAdvisor, OpenTable and other review sites on lesson-taking will be significant—that includes growing the revenue volume for teachers. Look for a time not long from now when decision-making about where to go for instruction will look more and more like decision-making about rental cars, restaurants and motels.

Doug Holub, a Proponent Group member at a public course in Fairfield, Conn., buys into this. "Of course it makes sense that people would evolve as far as how they go about choosing a golf instructor," says Holub, who recently filled out his profile page on GolfMDs.com. "All of us have con-

verted to that method for other things we select and schedule." Holub has been wondering if his icons indicating certifications are persuasive on golfers viewing his profile. One of his first activities after completing the GolfMDs profile was to browse other coaches' pages on the site. "I found myself comparing certifications and trying to assess how much that would mean to people—my bling versus their bling."

Not as much as one might expect, according to an attitude survey that GolfMDs has used in drafting its business model. "We polled golfers looking for the top four factors they wish to use in evaluating a golf instructor," reports Weber. "In order of importance, they said they look for consumer reviews, then location, then pricing and finally the teacher's experience and certifications."

This past golf season, veteran instructor Kandi Comer experienced her normal, steady flow of phone calls from longstanding clients wishing to schedule a date and time for the next golf lesson. However in 2014 she also brought about 35 new private students into her stable—many of them were nothing to her but a name on a computer screen until they first showed up on the tee. "The trend is building for people to do a search and book lessons online," says Comer, a Proponent Group member based at Old Trail Golf Club west of Charlottesville, Va. "It's been amazing to me

Going for golf lessons is more uplifting and fun than having a plumber replace your bathroom toilet. As a result, the word-of-mouth online for lessons could and should have a different flavor than other review sites.



how comfortable the younger age group is with doing that."

Comer recently began to notice that she would mention the names of students to her colleagues in the Old Trail golf shop and get blank looks every time. "These are golfers who come on-property without ever calling me and without calling the main number or walking up to the counter. I thought they must have been referred to me by the golf shop but they found their own way, through these new tools." Comer seems to embrace them all. She sends videos via her YouTube account and her Twitter feed, posts clinic news on her Facebook page, fills out all the online listing profiles (with photograph, which is critical) and even has a Yelp account.

"Using the Internet in every way possible to build business is a habit we all need to get into," says Comer. "You discover all these different ways of getting your message out and if you stick with it you get results."

That's a summary of the current marketing landscape deserving an enthusiastic review—complete with five stars.

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What I've Learned: Mike Bender

Mike Bender Golf Academy, Lake Mary, FL

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



If the fictional character Angus MacGyver ever came to life and needed golf coaching, Mike Bender would be the obvious choice to teach him. The TV secret agent who could take apart and repurpose everyday objects to deal with seemingly unsolvable problems is comparable in method—and success rate—to the rangy, renowned Bender. Golf instructors who visit Mike's 24-year-old namesake academy in Lake Mary, Fla., are

quick to check out the MEGSA PPE section of his range tee. It's a set of hitting stations with movable positioning guides—complicated to devise but very user-friendly if you know the swing the way Mike does.

A very early member of Proponent Group, Bender was a three-time NCAA All-American and two-time NCAA Division III individual champion before spending several seasons on the PGA Tour from 1987-89. The Iowa native in the familiar bush hat is 2009 PGA of America National Teacher of the Year and has been ranked among the Top Five Best Teachers in America by Golf Digest. For nearly two decades, Bender has been included in GOLF Magazine's Top 100 Teacher list.

Zach Johnson, the 2007 Masters Champion, has trained with Mike since he turned professional. On the LPGA, tournament winners Seon Hwa Lee and Joo Mi Kim also achieved victories with the help of Mike's coaching expertise and energy. Jonathan Byrd, Robert Damron and two-time U.S. Open champ Lee Janzen are other notable members of the Bender stable of students. All told, Mike has helped nearly two dozen PGA Tour, Champions Tour and LPGA Tour professionals with their games.

In a recent conversation with member/interviewer Paul Ramee, the veteran coach, teacher and academy operator shared his reflections and insights.

Mike, could you talk about your introduction to golf and how that came about?

When I was 12 my parents got divorced and I went to live with my mother in Riverside, Calif. My dad stayed back in Iowa and I would visit him in the summers. One afternoon he asked me if I would like to go fishing, which I really liked to do. We could not find the fishing equipment but there was a set of clubs in the garage so he suggested we play golf. I reluctantly went with him and we drove to a nearby executive course to play nine holes. Going down the first hole the pro came out and said that both of us

were not allowed to play out of one bag so I ended up watching my dad play nine. I went back the next day to try it for myself and ended up playing every day after that.

Did that first experience convert you?

Living in California during the winter with my mom, I mostly played basketball and football with some golf mixed in from time to time. I was not playing any tournament golf in California until my senior year in high school when I began to play year-round. We played 9-hole matches in high school and I wasn't competing in many junior tournaments, so I didn't receive any college scholarship offers. I ended up going to northern California and attending California State University at Stanislaus, which is a Division III school near Modesto. They had just won the Div III National championships for the second time so I was excited to play golf for them.

How did things unfold once you were through college?

After I got out I played the Asian Tour. I also competed on mini-tours in places like the Dakotas and California. I did this from 1980 until I got married, in 1985. At that point I had been competing professionally for five straight years and had not gotten to the PGA Tour. There was a job opportunity at Sunnyside Country Club in Waterloo, Iowa, and I decided to take it. My job description was to give lessons and play with the members when I wasn't teaching. It was a great job because I was able to join the Iowa PGA section and play in some of their tournaments. My position at the club was seasonal so at the end of the summer I entered the PGA Tour Qualifying School for the seventh time. My confidence was high from the success I had during the summer



Mike Bender caddying for Zach Johnson at the 2012 John Deere Classic which Johnson won.

and I qualified, earning my card for the 1987 season. I kept my eligibility through 1989.

Sounds like you made the right decision to try for a tour career one last time. What happened after you lost your card?

When I came off the tour I started teaching a lot of mini-tour players with aspirations of regaining my tour card. I felt that I could help the younger mini-tour players because of my trials and tribulations in getting to and playing the PGA Tour.

Not quite like helping the 90-shooter straighten out his slice, was it?

No, and in retrospect it's unusual that I started teaching pros before I taught beginners and amateurs, which would be the normal order.

MEGSA/PPE—that stands for Most Efficient Golf Swing Attainable /Perfect Practice Equipment. You are the developer of it, and your academy in Lake Mary has an intriguing MEGSA setup. How did this come about?

When I was playing on the PGA Tour I took some lessons from David Leadbetter and he was the first instructor to video me. I had an upright swing with a lot of hip slide and a high finish. He explained what I needed to work on sent me on my way to practice. My routine was to take a lesson from him once a week, practice every day and play in mini-tour events. I practiced hard and each time I went back to David the video revealed very little if any change. This process went on for three months and was very frustrating.

Three months of dedicated work—that seems like it would yield decent results.

I was really frustrated and decided that I did not want to waste any more time, so I started using some feedback aids. By placing barriers in my way I started to see some amazing results and my swing began to change. It gave me my first strong sense of the importance of feedback during the swing-change process. When I started teaching I realized that my students were going through the same experience I had gone through, having a lot of difficulty producing swing changes. I decided there had to be a better way.

Here we should say that, back in childhood, you were one of those boys who took apart radios and lawnmowers to see how they worked, and learned to repair them. Early training for the guy who would devise all this MEGSA gear, correct?

I did have good skills in things like carpentry and working with tools of all kinds, so that was obviously an asset. I went into my back yard and started building some stations out of wood and other material like those foam swim noodles, to help me with my swing. Eventually I showed students how to set up these stations so they would be able to productively work on the drills we prescribe and get feedback.

Is this something you continue to pursue?

I have an engineer whom I work closely with on prototypes and ideas that he then goes and builds. I am always looking for better ways for my students to learn and practice. These tools such as the MEGSA PPE produce amazing results and help speed up the learning curve. I would never teach without stations like these

again because without the feedback it is very difficult to improve significantly.

The Mike Bender Golf Academy, at the far end of the range at daily-fee Magnolia Plantation, is almost a pilgrimage site for instructors who aspire to having a first-class home base. Talk about how it came to be.

Previously I was based at Timacuan Golf Club, which is also in Lake Mary. During my 22 years there I went through four different ownerships. Finally the fifth owner came in and felt like he knew more than I did about this part of the business. It became a difficult environment.

It prompted you to start looking around?

It did. I looked at various options and contacted the owner at Magnolia Plantation. He let us develop the back of the range and we put together an ideal agreement. We have a long-term lease and a great academy and I couldn't be happier.

What is your feeling now, a few years later, as you come to your academy in the morning?



“I do think most teachers today are doing a better job of coaching the whole game and not just teaching the swing, as they once did.”

-Mike Bender

There may be bigger training facilities than ours, but there isn't one that's any better functionally. After so many years in the business, having the chance to build an academy from scratch was a dream come true. We designed the building based on how we train, with no wasted space. We have a nice-sized tee, club repair, one large hitting bay, a putting studio, a fitness room and several rooms to review video.

When coaches planning to design their own academies ask how it's done, what do you say?

The biggest piece of advice I would give someone interested in building a training facility is to design it with the mindset of how you teach, and the way you train your students should dictate how you set up your space. Too many facilities I see look nice but end up with a lot of wasted space because they were not custom-designed and not fully thought out. Having gone through the process I am always available if anyone has any questions.

The Mike Bender Golf Academy has a full-time junior training program. Can you talk a little bit about that?

I had always been interested in coaching a golf team with a limited amount of people. What really works, in my opinion, is to get with the same group every day and really get to know them. So we decided to offer a program on a small-scale basis and try to make it the Harvard of junior training academies.

Two of my great joys are teaching juniors and profession-

als—now I'm able to teach juniors to train like tour players. It is something I've always wanted to offer.

The training aid market does have a lot of activity these days. What is your overview about working with these aids?

Without them it is a much longer fight for many of our students. There are thousands of devices out there, with the majority of them not being very good. But there are also some very good ones. It is interesting that most are designed by amateurs. I use swing guides, swing extenders, noodles, things of that sort. In many cases I use the training aid differently than what it was intended, one example being the impact bag.

Why and how do you use an impact bag then?

With some students I will place a shaft on the target side of the bag and then place the bag behind it, away from the target. I ask the student to hit the bag and watch how the bag spins. If it spins to the left they are coming from the outside, if it spins to the right they are coming from the inside. I may place the bag on its end and ask them to miss it from the inside.

How has playing the PGA Tour influenced your teaching?

I think that it really helps me with my competitive players and knowing what they are feeling under pressure with their swings. Helping players learn and understand all aspects of tournament golf is invaluable. Having done it myself I am able to provide that. I also believe that my struggles with getting to the tour and having to learn how to make swing changes has helped me understand what players are going through. From being around tour players I have non-swing advice that I can share, as well. For example, how to prepare mentally for competition, how to make a yardage book, dissect the golf course, and so forth.

In these interviews we always ask about mentors or people who have influenced your approach to golf and golf coaching. Who influenced Mike Bender?

There really were four people I spent a lot of time with as I worked on improving my game, which ultimately shaped my philosophy. Those four were Ben Doyle, Mike Adams, David Leadbetter and Mac O'Grady.

Quite a foursome. Which one of them did you meet first?

I spent some time with Ben Doyle during my college years in Northern California. He was working with Bobby Clampett and as people generally know, Ben was a great proponent of The Golfing Machine system, which is based on physics and engineering. I would recommend to any young teacher that they read Homer Kelley's classic book, "The Golfing Machine." Because it is based



Mike Bender's new facility features multiple video review rooms, a fitness facility, putting studio, hitting bay and just about anything else a student could ever need.

on science, they can use it to build a great foundation. They will understand how physics plays an important role in the mechanics of the swing.

How about the others?

Mike Adams and I played the Dakotas tour together. During that time, and afterward, he would help me with my swing, taking time away from his own practice. We are great friends. Once I got to Orlando, I spent some time with David Leadbetter. He helped me while I was competing on the Space Coast mini-tour. The person who has had the biggest impact on me

in this profession is Mac O'Grady. Mac appealed to me because all of his information was based on science and physics, meaning it was not up for interpretation. He would ask questions like, "Which would you rather do, fly in an airplane that was built by engineers or one that was built by people who simply went out to the airport and watched planes take off and land?" No one I've been around knows more about the golf swing than Mac and he has had an impact on most all this era's great teachers. I learned something from all these great pros and they are all very gifted and passionate about what they teach. No matter how long you've been teaching, it's vital that you keep an open mind and continue to learn.

What about current trends in golf coaching?

I am a little concerned about relying on technology too much. Electronic tools like TrackMan are very valuable, but too many young instructors are relying totally on technology and not listening to the sound and flight of the ball. I think if you use technology to verify what you are teaching rather than to dictate what you teach then it is fine. I do think most teachers today are doing a better job of coaching the whole game and not just teaching the swing, as they once did.

Taking your story up to the present, is there some fresh concept that's got your interest?

New data shows that the longer you keep your eyes square to the target line—preferably through the entire shot—the better the result. Also, the shifting of the eyes will affect the swing in a lot of ways. The best golfers—players like Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Ben Hogan and I would add, Zach Johnson—all keep their eyes parallel to the target line. A fellow teacher, Jeff Balen, brought this to my attention with quite a bit of research behind it and I believe he is correct. We are seeing some very good results when interjecting this into our coaching. Part of what makes teaching so much fun is learning new performance traits that contribute to success. You then back that up with better ways to practice those important traits. I would not want to be doing anything else and as someone once said, if you enjoy what you do you will never work a day in your life. Very true words.

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MEMBER MILESTONES

Please Welcome Proponent Group's October New Members

Jordan Gibbs, Huntingdon Valley Country Club, Huntingdon Valley, PA and The Jupiter Island Club, Jupiter, – Associate Member

Brian Johnson, Elmcrest Country Club, Cedar Rapids, IA – Full Member

Ted Kiegiel, Carolina Country Club, Raleigh, NC – Full Member

Andrew Lanahan, University Club, Baton Rouge, LA – Full Member

Sebastian Martinez, RedTail Golf Center, Portland, OR – Associate Member

Kyle McClone, Brian Mogg Golf Academy/Waldorf Astoria Golf Academy, Orlando, FL – Full Member

Pete Popovich, The Golf Paradigm/Old South Golf Links, Bluffton, SC – Full Member

Eric Slack, Point O'Woods Golf & Country Club, Benton Harbor, MI – Full Member

Cory Southon, Eagles Nest Golf Club, Maple, Ontario, Canada – Associate Member

Golf Tips Magazine Taps Sessinghaus as their New Editor

Rick Sessinghaus is taking on the responsibilities of Editor for Golf Tips Magazine. He will be in charge of their seven issues to be published in 2015. He will still be coaching part time from his home base near Los Angeles when not working on the magazine. His company Mental Zone also continues to expand. Rick may be reaching out to some of our members for contributions to Golf Tips or if you have an article idea, you may reach him directly at rick@ricksessinghaus.com.



Ressa Earns Master Status from TrackMan

International Proponent Group member, **Tim Ressa** who is based at Singapore Island C.C. is the first teacher in Asia to earn this highest level of training from TrackMan. Ressa has been teaching for the past five years in Singapore.

Barnard Honored with Smith Service Award

The LPGA Teaching and Club Professionals have honored Proponent member **Marvol Barnard** of Green Valley, AZ as the 2014 recipient of the Marilyn Smith Service Award. The award is given annually to the LPGA professional who emulates the qualities and the spirit of Smith – one of the 13 founders of the LPGA in 1950 – in the promotion of golf, community and charitable involvement, dedication, leadership and the ability to inspire her fellow professionals.

Barnard teaches at Haven Golf Course in Green Valley, AZ and has been a member of the LPGA since 2002.



Helman Launches Red Zone Golf Combine

Member, **Jason Helman** of Wyncance G.C. in Ontario, has announced the launch of the Red Zone Golf Combine as the first app that allows you to test your short game and quantify your skills. The Red Zone Golf Combine helps golfers determine their strengths and weaknesses around the greens and provides comparisons to Tour statistics for those same shots. There is a worldwide leaderboard and coaches can create their own private leaderboard to engage their own students. Visit redzonegolfcombine.com for more information or go to the iTunes app store to download.



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