

Member Q&A: “What I’ve Learned...”

Stan Utley, Grayhawk Golf Club

Interview by AMF member Paul Ramee



AMF Member Stan Utley teaches at Grayhawk Golf Club in Scottsdale, Arizona.

This article continues our series featuring a variety of insights from top golf professionals and teachers who are part of the AMF community.

For a guy who is so closely associated with the short game, you’ve traveled a long road in the game of golf. Can you give us the highlights?

I was born in Thayer, Missouri, a small town of 3,500 people with no golf course. My primary sport through grade school and high school was basketball. When I was 12 we moved to the town of West Plains, which had a golf course and in retrospect that is where I was put in touch with the people who taught me the raw fundamentals of grip and stance. They seemed to come naturally to me and I loved the game.

I rose to the top as a local player and started to compete outside the area. At age 14, I finished second in the State Junior championship. I was fortunate to continue developing through high school and received a golf scholarship to the University of Missouri.

When I was 13 I got my biggest break. I met a man by the name of Ken Lanning who owned a real estate company and was a great amateur player in Missouri.

He loved helping junior golfers. When he realized I was more serious, he told my parents “I’ll help Stan anytime he wants.” Ken taught me the fundamentals I still use, teach and write about.

Ken sent me to see another one of his friends by the name of Jim Parkins, who was considered one of the best wedge players in Missouri. At around age 20 I was also exposed to Jim Tom from St. Louis, who had a stellar amateur career and played in national amateur tournaments. He taught me the technical elements of the stroke that I teach today.

At the University of Missouri, I ended up in a nice college program, with a good schedule and I was able to make the team immediately. If I had attended one of the very top schools, I never could have made the team as a freshman. I ended up being second-team All-American in my junior and senior years.

After college I tried to make it onto the PGA Tour. A friend of a friend of my fathers offered to sponsor me, which was quite a break. This allowed me to make better decisions because they were not predicated on money.

I missed tour school in 1984-86. In 1986, I lipped out a 30 foot putt on the last hole to fall short of a PGA Tour card by one stroke. I missed at tour school 15 times, but in 1989, playing on a sponsor’s exemption I won the Chattanooga Classic. That gave me tour privileges and I remained exempt through 1992. I also finished third on the Nike Tour money list which gave me PGA Tour privileges in 1994..

What do you miss the most about tour life?

As a player, I loved that pursuit of a better and better game. I built in myself the belief system that I could get it done. From time to time that still stirs in me now and the feeling that I always knew I could improve. Ironically, this is the best my ball-striking has ever been. Right now I have a job that I love and I turn 49 in January. So, I would love to play in a few Champions Tour events each year once I turn 50 to see how my game stacks up. I don’t intend for my play to interrupt my teaching career.

How does having a background on tour make it easier to become a good teacher?

David Cook, a sports psychologist I worked with when I was on tour, helped me develop a strategy for discovering who I am and how am I at my best. We realized that I was at my best when I was encouraging other players. So, I used to teach on purpose and in return it made me a better player. When I helped others I felt better about who I was.

Then I started to charge people. Having a fee involved added pressure. I would teach in the Columbia, Missouri area and also coach players on the Nationwide Tour. When I started to charge a fee more people started to approach me and ask me to work with them. Before I started to charge, people were afraid to ask for help out of respect for the fact I was competing.

What happened to me you could never plan. When I started teaching Jay Haas, it put me into a different level and Jay’s success drew more players to me.

When did you realize you had a talent for teaching?

I was teaching at Perchy Creek driving range which is owned by Rich Poe, my college golf coach. One day I demanded from one of my students that he hold the club correctly and stand correctly. Now he had taken lots of lessons and he told me, “no one has ever asked me to do this.” At that moment I realized if I could get people to hold it and stand correctly it put me into a pretty good league.

What is most satisfying about being a full-time teacher?

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– Stan Utley

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Aside from the ridiculous grin on the student's face, the best part is that expectation of good swings and great ball flight. I'll be teaching two or three buddies at a given period. The friend that I just worked with will be getting ready to hit, and it will be obvious how certain he is that the next shot is really going to be good. Even better is when I look at his buddies and see the look in their eyes that says they know he is going to strike a great shot.

Who has helped you become the teacher you are?

Well, Ken Lanning would be the first, his teaching is really at the core of who I am as a teacher. Second, Rob Akins has been a big help, he has incredible passion and is the ultimate coach and motivator. One night, I asked Rob what was the first thing you look at when you give a lesson. He told me it was that particular player's psych-out shot. Rob's question is: "What shot is the player's subconscious mind most afraid of hitting"? When we discussed what it was for me, I said it was my duck-hook. He then told me, "You only hit the duck hook when there is trouble on the right side." We then went to work on fixing the shot to the right and the hook went away.

Finally, I got to know Jim Hardy well, I was working with Peter Jacobsen on his short game and Jim was working with him on his long game. Peter did a little matchmaking. He told me if I would teach Jim how to putt, Jim would help me with my ball-striking. Jim and I met and began to discuss the golf swing. He told me there were two types of players, those that generate speed with their body pivot and those that generate speed with their arm swing. He pointed out that the rules are not the same for both. I also learned that I was in between the two and could do either one and with Jim's help I learned to use a one-plane swing.

How do you typically structure your lesson time?

My typical lesson runs three hours during which we cover the entire short game. We putt, chip, pitch, hit bunker shots, hit full wedges. We then circle back and review what we did earlier. You would be surprised how much sinks in the second time around that did not click the first time. All the parts are connected and by going over it twice all the parts complement each other.

Explain the different facets of your teaching business.

My business is broken up into four different categories, the first is the private instruction I do at Grayhawk Golf Club. The second is the work I do on tour, the third is my one-day school program at private clubs, and the fourth is the corporate work I do through the relationships I have developed. Rounding it all out is the writing I do for Golf Digest and my book writing.

You made a rather quick ascent to the Golf Digest 50 Greatest Teachers list. What do you attribute that rise to?

I understand the politics of the process, I understand how important the tour player recognition is and since I was teaching mainly tour players at the time it is not that surprising to me that I moved up the list as fast as I did. Now, if it was based on overall teaching experience, it may not have happened that way.

When you were on Tour, did you work much with teachers?



Stan Utley discusses how he teaches putting at this year's AMF Instructor Summit.

I've never been without a teacher I could trust. In college, it was Mr. Lanning, after him I worked with a gentleman by the name of Craig Harrison who came to my club in Missouri. I worked with Fred Griffin at Grand Cypress, with great success. I had my best year on Tour in 1993, while working with Fred. Since then, I have worked with Rob Akins and am currently with Jim Hardy.

One of the biggest hiccups in my career was not working with Mike Adams earlier. Mike and I have become friends the past few years and I'm pretty sure that if I had worked with Mike early in my career the outcome could have been a lot different.

Stan, you won in your rookie year on tour. As you look back, did you think things would turn out differently?

I would not want to change a thing. I am very pleased with where I am now. However, one thing that would have changed the outcome would have been if I had spent more time chipping and putting while I was competing. I should have never tried to change my golf swing when I was on Tour. I got so focused on chasing a better swing and adding driving distance that I got distracted from keeping my short game at its peak. All Tour players are always pursuing changes to get better, but chasing constant improvement in a weak area can backfire by keeping you from maintaining what you already have.