

# Member Q&A: “What I’ve Learned...”

## Paul Ramee, Jr., Bulls Bridge Golf Club

Interview by David Gould



**GBN Member Paul Ramee, Jr. is the Club Manager/Head Professional at Bull’s Bridge GC in Kent, CT.**

**This article continues our series featuring a variety of insights from highly respected GBN members.**

*This is a special installment of GBN’s monthly Q & A column, in which we turn the tables on Paul Ramée, who is not only director of golf and club manager at Bull’s Bridge Golf Club in Kent, Connecticut, but also moonlights as the interviewer and author of “What I’ve Learned.” Soon to begin his second decade at Bull’s Bridge, Paul sat down to talk about his own career and about his ongoing conversations with fellow GBN members that turn into these articles in each newsletter.*

**Hearing the story of how you became a golfer reminds us that not everybody comes up the traditional junior ranks. Is that a fair assessment?**

Well, my father was an avid tennis player, and my parents weren’t inclined to start me out in golf. But they had the good sense to buy a house abutting a golf course, Fairmount Country Club in Chatham, New Jersey. I could walk through our back yard right onto a little loop of four holes. Tennis was the big sport back then, and my father was an accomplished player. I got tired of having tennis balls whiz by me so I got some clubs and I’d go out and play those four holes when no one was around. I figured I had my own private course.

**You managed to keep from getting caught—were you a fast runner?**

I tried to be discreet, and this went on for a few years. One day they figured I was spending so much time on the property I might as well join the staff. Kevin Riley, the head professional, and his assistant, Ralph Romano, offered me a job, working the range and the bag room. Of course I said yes.

**Were you as good at golf as your dad was at tennis?**

I played well enough to make my high school team, and it was a strong program so we were competitive and had a lot of fun. Six guys from my team went on to play college golf. I went to Seton Hall University and played on the team. When I got out in 1991 I worked at Fairmount Country Club as an Assistant and in 1993 I applied for work at Canoe Brook Country Club in Summit, New Jersey. Greg Lecker was the professional there—he had just come from Oakmont—and Greg hired me as an assistant.

**That’s a very fine club to get started at.**

Between Somerset Hills, Baltusrol and Canoe Brook, those were the prominent clubs in my area. So yes, it was a great place to be. My father mentioned that if I performed well at Canoe Brook that might be my entrée to Oakmont. I moved to Pittsburgh and worked for Bob Ford from 1995 through ’97, which gave me more very high-quality experience and training.

**With that resume it would seem like you had what was necessary to keep moving up. What came next?**

I applied for a couple head jobs and got offered a good one, at The Park Country Club of Buffalo, in the town of Williamsville, New York. It’s a club with a very traditional atmosphere. Paul Runyan won the 1934 PGA Championship there, in a playoff over Craig Wood. The golf course was designed by Colt & Alison and the clubhouse architect was Clifford Wendehack, who designed the clubhouses at Winged Foot and also at Ridgewood Country Club. I stayed there as head professional for five years.

**That would take us to 2003, and the move down to Connecticut—to a club with no tradition at all.**

That’s just how it was. I signed on as the head golf professional at Bull’s Bridge Golf Club in May of ’03, and by that time the three clubs where I’d previously worked had celebrated their 100th anniversaries. Bull’s Bridge had six holes open and a temporary clubhouse. I had to go out and buy my own phone, desk and chair, we had to build everything. The town wouldn’t let our

developer clear the entire site for construction, in case something happened and the job never got finished. So Tom Fazio cleared land for six holes, built them, cleared the acreage for six more, built those, then did it one last time.

**Paul, along with being a member of the Golf Business Network, you’re also part of our editorial team—handling the What I’ve Learned column.**

That’s right, and it’s something I’ve enjoyed very much. I joined the organization as a member fairly early on, and to be honest I don’t remember how I got the writing job. I guess it made sense that a member professional might be the one to do these interviews—it’s an extension of the normal thing that happens, golf professionals talking to other golf professionals, asking questions. After we take care of that, the hard part comes, writing it all down. But the guys, Lorin and Bob, gave me a lot of help. Certainly a lot of encouragement, too.

**Who was your first interview?**

I started off with Todd Anderson. I don’t have any journalistic training, plus Todd is so accomplished at what he does, so it was a little intimidating. I remember I couldn’t get the tape re-

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order to work. I just wrote down everything he said by hand. You learn to write fast.

**Todd being an instruction specialist, would it have been easier to do your first interview with a professional who was on your side of the business, in golf operations?**

I didn't look at it that way. Basically I was curious to interview Todd and hear his thoughts. It almost felt like I was doing it selfishly. I wanted to understand his approach to instruction, and normally getting all that time to pick his brain might not be possible. So I just asked about all the things I wanted to know, and of course Todd was great about it.

**Obviously there has been a great wealth of information shared in these columns you've put together. Anything you recall in particular?**

What stands out are the moments when a golf professional talks about commitment to success under challenging circumstances, which, as everybody knows, there's been plenty of. I remember asking Dennis Satyshur how his club, Caves Valley, would be able to make it through the major difficulties that arose from the 2008 financial crisis.

**Remind us what Dennis told you.**

He gave a great answer, about how proactive and serious he and his board members were in their communication to the membership. They described their message as a three-legged stool. Members were asked to commit to the club—meaning, keep their memberships. Secondly, they were requested to use the club. People have choices as to where they'll spend their leisure budgets and time, so it was asked that they think of Caves Valley first. And the third message was: Make a point of bringing your friends and showing off the club to new prospects, because that's where the capital expenditure money was going to come from—initiation fees. In some ways that may all sound obvious but it was the no-nonsense way they did it that struck me.

**That's a piece of advice involving communication, which you often tend to ask about.**

Well, golf is so much a people business, that skill can't be underestimated. Martin Hall gave me a good analogy when I interviewed him. He said, "Communication surrounding an issue or a problem at a golf facility tends to resemble one of two liquids—either it's water or it's gasoline. In other words, you extinguish anger or you escalate it, based on what's said and when and how you say it. I remind my staff of that. Martin's message is that even a crisis can be an opportunity, although if you pour the water wisely, it will never get to that level. For example, the twosome of good players that goes off 15 minutes after a foursome of higher-handicappers would be one of those little brushfires in waiting. You have to anticipate—get in a cart and go make sure the twosome gets around them. Twosomes don't have standing, traditionally, but that's beside the point, proactively solving and anticipating problems is something we need to teach our staff.

**Any conversations about business development come to mind, from the interviews?**

Jon Tattersall spoke persuasively about the need to "make the pie bigger" at a golf program or an academy. I use that expression with my assistants regularly. For a small club, doing just 7,200 rounds a year, we do about \$90,000 annually in lesson revenue. That's from our efforts to grow the pie, so that staff

compensation can grow along with it. One of the new initiatives I am going to use in 2012 to incent the staff to grow the game is on April 1 to identify who, based on last year's numbers, is not playing golf here, or coming for instruction and figure out how do we get them out? I believe the answer is to quietly and respectfully promote our programs. My assistants will need to work it into their conversations with members, reminding them about clinics, tournaments, practice or lessons, because we truly do want them to play better and enjoy their golf more.

**It sounds like you will make this a priority in 2012.**

Absolutely, and in October of 2012 we will go back to see how much we were able to increase activity. Then it's easy for me to say to the board—look at my assistants, they generated \$40,000 in new revenue. There were seven new women in the clinics, 15 more kids in the junior camp. It's new revenue for the club and makes the staff bonus issue a better conversation.

**After 10 years up in the hills of Connecticut, how would you describe your experience at Bull's Bridge?**

I've said a fair amount about communication because the position I have at the club brings an interesting communication challenge. We have 160 members and 90 percent of them have a primary residence in New York City. They spend their weekends at their homes in the country. The in-person communication tends to happen Friday through Sunday. So as the week goes along I will need to use email to keep the leadership informed. We had a tough beginning. The week the developer got started selling memberships was 9/11. Our first year of operation was a disaster in terms of weather—terrible rainstorms that caused us to have to reseed a number of fairways several times. But the superintendent and I stuck with it. We showed loyalty, and in return the club has been loyal to us. They are great people, with excellent character, and those are the reasons why in my view this club has been a tremendous success story.

**At the beginning, you were in charge of the golf operation, then you ended up in the club manager role. Was that something you evolved into?**

It was part of the natural process of the club getting into full operation and completing its infrastructure. I received some interesting advice from John Traub, a PGA professional who is known as a great player but is equally accomplished in running an operation. I was talking about the club being new and developing itself and he advised me to step forward to take whatever responsibility needed handling. "If they'll let you run the locker room, run the locker room," John told me. "If they ask about you running food-and-beverage, run food-and-beverage. And if you don't know something, call a pro who's done it."

**That was excellent insight that clearly has helped you develop your career. Were you close friends with John, or did you happen to work for him?**

I played one round of golf with him, in a pro-pro event down in Florida. We weren't partners, just in the foursome together. There's a brief wait on one tee and John started asking me about my position at Bull's Bridge. That's when he gave me that advice. That's really how it's been in our profession since the beginning, I have to think. This column is a great vehicle, if I can take the liberty of saying that, but it's really just a formalized version of what's always happened—golf professionals talking to each other, asking questions, sharing information.