

Member Q&A: “What I’ve Learned...”

Rick Grayson, Rick Grayson Golf School

Interview by GBN Special Correspondent David Gould



GBN Member Rick Grayson is the longtime Director of the Rick Grayson Golf School at Rivercut Golf Course in Springfield, Missouri.

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

You’ve been voted Midwest PGA Teacher of the Year five times, you’re on the GOLF Magazine Top 100 Teachers list, you’re a US Kids Golf Top 50 Kids Teacher—so, you must have known from the start that teaching was your vocation. All I really knew from the start was I had a strong desire to make golf my career. I was a decent high school player in Pryor, Oklahoma, my hometown. I moved to Springfield after college and the people in that golf community made a very positive impression on me. Dorl Sweet, the head professional at Grandview Golf Cse.—since renamed the Bill and Payne Stewart Golf Cse.—was someone I particularly admired and learned from.

You ended up working under Dorl Sweet. Was that who got you started as a PGA Apprentice?

That’s correct. I started under Dorl in 1976. He had lengthy experience and success working on the private club side. He had the idea of switching over to a high-quality municipal and bringing country-club service to the public player. Dorl was skilled in all aspects of running an operation—he was an excellent merchandiser, he promoted the game. He was a great PGA professional so it was fortunate for me to get my training from him.

With such a thorough indoctrination, did you feel prepared to dive into a head job of your own?

Yes, and that’s what I did. After I left Dorl I became head professional at Tri-Way Country Club, in Republic, Missouri, a Springfield suburb. I was running tournaments, retailing, managing the golf staff, teaching—the whole nine yards. I came to realize that, of all those duties, the part of it I really enjoyed was instruction. I have a lot of school teachers in my clan—my mother, my sister, two aunts—so maybe it’s in the Grayson blood.

People say that when you’re good at something, you naturally enjoy it.

That’s true enough, but I actually enjoyed teaching golf before I was good at it. I taught through my own game and my own personal swing keys, like most young golf instructors. I didn’t realize

how little I knew until a student came along who was exceptionally talented. Her name was Anne Cain and she was one of those great players you get lucky enough to work with. Anne ended up as an All-American at the University of Georgia, played in several U.S. Women’s Opens—really a superior talent.

So, you couldn’t just keep repeating the grip-stance-and-posture fundamentals with her, right?

No, I needed to really learn the swing. At that time the Golf Digest Schools were very prominent and had locations all over. I attended one or two and then attached myself to those teachers—Bob Toski, Jim Flick, Peter Kostis, most especially Toski.

How were you able to specialize like that and still do the work of a head golf professional?

I couldn’t, so I quit being a head pro in 1984 and devoted myself to teaching full-time. It was something I thought about for a while, knowing I needed to support a family and wanting to build a successful career. It wasn’t an easy decision, in the sense that people questioned how I was going to make it work.

Yeah, how was it going to work?

I wasn’t entirely sure, but on the simplest level I earned maybe \$25,000 in teaching revenue and only devoting about one-third of my time to it. Just multiplying by three I saw the opportunity to generate enough income. Also, things were happening on the head-pro side of the business. Guys were losing the concessions that provided the real earning power. I figured I would be one of those head professionals who had the shop taken away, had the range taken away, so I made a pro-active decision to do what I wanted.

And that decision brought you back to Grandview Golf Course.

Yes, I set up an arrangement with my old boss, Dorl Sweet, and spent 12 years running the instruction program at Grandview. I paid him rent and was the

concessionaire on everything I could generate. It was the real sweet spot period for a local or regional golf school, drawing on corporate groups, civic groups, schools and just the area player who wanted that experience.

How did you make the move to Rivercut, where your school is located now?

As the Rivercut development was coming on-stream, a man named Jim Morris was approached regarding possible construction of a high-tech teaching and learning center. Jim was Payne Stewart’s godfather and a close friend of Payne’s father, Bill Stewart. Jim had been very successful in real estate and was

When someone says, “We have too many golf courses,” your reflex answer has to be: “No we don’t—we have too few golfers...” That commits you to growing the game, believing that. – Rick Grayson

able to underwrite the \$365,000 cost of the facility, which is named after his late wife, Connie Morris, a great tournament golfer in her own right. Jim said he would do it “on the condition that Rick Grayson was put in charge of the center.” He knew my passion for growing the game and passing on the values we all shared, in that close-knit golf community. So Rivercut became the home of my school and my business.

Could you share some of the highlights of your work with junior golfers over the past 25 or so years?

One definite highlight is having over 30 of my students go on to receive college golf scholarships. My work with Anne Cain was an early highlight, and still one of the most rewarding. I also coached a boy, Jace Long, who went on to play No. 1 at the University of Missouri. Six different juniors have come through our school and gone on to win state individual high school championships. There was one year when both the Missouri state boys champion and the Oklahoma state girls champion were my players.

What is it about the kids that gets you so motivated?

It comes down to an inner need of mine to share what golf has to offer. I have a total belief that it is the greatest game or sport for a person’s overall life experience. It can help teach honesty. It can help teach hard work. The game provided something so meaningful and important to me, that I want the same benefit for people who come after. If I help them put golf in their life from a young age, they can benefit from that their whole life. I played with my father until he was 84 years old.

The game’s got all these benefits, but they have to be demonstrated—they aren’t self-explanatory, right?

Correct, and the golf industry has basically hit it out of bounds when it comes to promoting the benefit of the game. Without

active, strategic promotion, it always slides over into that category of being a cult sport. It gets seen as a sport for the elite, or for people who want to be off by themselves. Every PGA professional and course owner has to fight that mindset. We are all leaders in this crusade to offer golf to the masses. When someone says, “We have too many golf courses,” your reflex answer has to be: “No we don’t—we have too few golfers for the courses that are in the market.” That commits you to growing the game, believing that.

Here’s the tough question—how does that get done?

Right now I’ll give you a simple, two-part answer: Go to the schools, because that’s where the kids are, and use SNAG. [Note: as most GBN members know, SNAG is a modified, play-anywhere form of golf that replicates all the skills of the game in a fun, safe fashion] This is how you get away from the constant problem of wanting to get kids out to the course, but not having good ways to get them there and get their use of the course paid for. We have to go to where the kids are. In Springfield, that is happening. Our city’s junior golf foundation has arranged with the schools to have SNAG be part of the Phys. Ed. curriculum. We invested \$60,000 of our charitable funds to get SNAG into all the Springfield schools. We said: If you accept this gear and teacher training, you have to guarantee us a six-week unit for every kid, every year. They signed on to that.

Can you follow up on that introduction?

Absolutely. We have a flow that every kid can easily follow. They can get started with SNAG at school, then they come play at the four-hole course the city built here at Rivercut, and from there they can go to the par-3 course that our junior golf foundation renovated completely. It was built in 1958 to introduce people to the game, but never maintained. We came in and rebuilt the greens, put in irrigation, put in Zoysia turf, built new tees, built

lights and a security fence. From Tuesday to Friday, any kid can play there for free if they’re with a paying adult.

Your community has accomplished so much in player development. Why is Springfield, Missouri such a hotbed for youth participation?

There has been a strong golf culture here going back generations. Springfield is the home of Horton Smith, Masters champ and PGA of America president. It’s where tour pros like Ky Laffoon, Herman Keiser, Cathy Reynolds, Leonard Dodson and of course Payne Stewart are from. I counted up tour victories by Springfield natives once, and it’s over 60.

But all that means is we had a base to build on. We’ve chosen to build on that, we’ve been committed to providing golf as an opportunity to all Springfield kids. What we’ve done, any community can do, if they have the will. Let me ask you, why is the College Baseball World Series played every year in Omaha, Nebraska? I’ll tell you why—because somebody said that would be great for our community. That’s something that fits our character, and we want that. It’s the same with youth golf development.



The junior programs that Rick Grayson is actively involved with serve 9,000 children in the Springfield school system and 4,700 at the local golf facilities. The Boys and Girls Clubs provide the “golf bus” shown here to transport juniors to and from the city’s Betty Allison Junior Course.