

What I've Learned: Mitchell Spearman

Isleworth C.C., Windermere, FL

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



It's no stretch to call Mitchell Spearman an old-time swing doctor and, at the same time, an innovator who seizes the latest resources. Known to possess a teacher's eye reminiscent of Harvey Penick or Manuel de la Torre, Spearman was forward-thinking enough to devise the first mobile app for golf training. One of GOLF Magazine's Top 100 Teachers in America since that program's inception, he has worked with

a variety of Touring professionals from around the world during his career. His book, A.I.M. Of Golf, is a tour de force of "dynamic visual imagery" as a means of golf mastery. A native of the UK, by age 18 Spearman had qualified for the British PGA Championship. In 1988 Spearman moved to the U.S. to join David Leadbetter at Lake Nona, holding down the No. 2 position in the Leadbetter organization for a decade. He lives in Florida in the winter months at Isleworth C.C. in Windermere, Florida. In the summer Spearman teaches at Doral Arrowwood in Rye Brook, NY. In this interview with Paul Ramee, Jr., Mitchell shares some of the highlights from his career and his teaching approach with fellow Proponent members.

Mitchell, you've got some pretty fair bloodlines as a golfer. Tell us about that. I started to play golf at an early age in London. My aunt was Marley Spearman, a two-time British Women's Amateur Champion and a Curtis Cup player. She and my uncle would take me to a local range when I was 6 or 7 years old. Thanks to them I got my start in the golf business.

As you kept with it, who were some of the early influences on you?

At the age of 12 I was very fortunate to get a job at a golf shop on the weekends. I can truly say that even then I felt teaching the game would become my passion. Every waking moment was consumed with how the club was swung and how the game was played. I was always thinking about the swing, whether I was caddying or watching the assistant pros give lessons. I was a young kid trying to soak in as much information as I possibly could. Later that summer I broke par for the first time and I was forever hooked. I continued to improve up until the age of 18.

Your career and that of David Leadbetter crossed paths in fortuitous fashion. You had to like your timing.

True, I was very fortunate to be able to align myself with David Leadbetter. He had an incredible eye for instruction and had just moved to Lake Nona. I would become his No. 2 person when I was still very young—age 25—so that opportunity really entrenched me in instruction. In addition to the huge benefits of working next to one of the best instructors of our time, I was exposed to the business side of the teaching industry at the top level. I'm referring in good part to David's partnering with IMG in the early 1990s, as we started doing corporate events and outings for Wall Street. This exposure is what led me to Hudson National Golf Club, and ultimately to Manhattan Woods. Proximity to New York City was very valuable. It gave me access to a high end clientele and provided me with great independence to run my instruction in a new fashion.

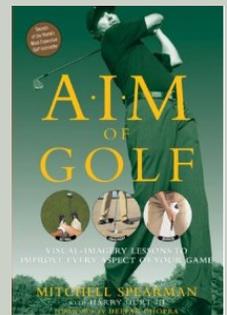
What do you mean by that?

While at Manhattan Woods the light bulb went off for me, instead of teaching one person for one hour, why would I not offer three people for three hours and maximize my time and ultimately my revenue.

Who are some of the contacts you learned from, during that period?

Well for one, Deepak Chopra. He is a famous physician and author, of course. Deepak really helped me understand how people need to be well internally. Also, how the body and mind work with each other. Mark McCormack, the founder of IMG,

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had lots of great insights to share. Believe it or not he also had fun imagery games. In addition, I have been fortunate to have been around many Wall Street CEO's and have learned valuable lessons from them over the years.

How about from the playing ranks?

The best players in the world have also helped shape who I am, no doubt of that. Being around gentlemen like Nick Faldo and Greg Norman has allowed me to see how they think and handle different situations. But as I think about it I have to say that I've

learned from every student I have taught.

Talk about how you were able to modify and then expand your teaching model.

I really decided to start to focus on the individual. Rather than teach 10 lessons a day, I thought I could be much more productive if I taught three longer sessions a day. This truly allowed me to develop players rather than give one-hour fixes. So I started offering three hours of instruction. If I was charging \$100 for one hour of instruction, I decided that I could invite people to come for three hours and have three people in these small schools, I could cover more material and ultimately they could develop as players. Then one day a client called me and said he wanted the three-hour session just for himself and he would pay for the other students to not be there. After the session he said that was the best lesson he had had. That's where the three hour, one-on-one format was born.

I've now extended the concept to offer annual programs for my students where they see me about 12 days per year, but have access to me through Skype if we're not near each other.

What are your thoughts on the recent European dominance? What, in your view, is behind their current success?

I think it goes back to Nick Faldo and his effect on the swing. Nick was always trying to perfect his swing and I think his beliefs became the model for Europe. We really put huge value on building the perfect swing first, while in America there is a larger emphasis on competition and learning to win with what you have. Secondly, there is a stronger culture at clubs in Europe. Youngsters are invited to play with adults in tournaments, the cost is significantly less in Europe, so ultimately there is more access to develop young players.

Where do you think we are as an industry with respect to sharing information?

I think the industry has made tremendous improvements in the sharing of good information. Technology has certainly been a nice addition, and the Proponent Group also plays a role. Information sharing will only make us better as teachers.

What are your thoughts on social media, as it affects golfers and the learning process?

Like anything, social media has its pros and cons. For the students there is a lot of information that floats around, which may promote confusion. For the instructor social media provides a very good vehicle for us to connect and share ideas. I believe we need to work hard on getting the message across and start to really promote the benefits of taking instruction.



Mitchell Spearman instructing PGA Tour player Billy Hurley.

Can you share how you handle the CEO-types?

Something I learned right away—and it should not come as a shock to anyone—is that time is of the essence. I ask them right off: “What would you like to get accomplished today?” Then I really try to get them into the left brain mode and out of the analytical way of thinking. I have been really fortunate to have worked with some important people and the great thing is that I have never really had to convince them of what I have had to say.

Any stories come to mind, as you think about these corner-office types?

I had one gentleman come to me and tell me his wife was really struggling and she needed me to unwind some things. So we worked pretty hard for a weekend and she did really well. Fast-forward a couple of years and the gentleman approaches me and tells me “you have changed my life” but “we have a problem.” He explained: “My wife is hooked and we are playing much more golf, however, I'm shooting 82 or 83 and she's shooting 80 or 81.”

Where do you envision future business opportunities?

Junior Golf should be our focus. We have to tell them they can play golf for the rest of their lives. We need to be mentors for these young men and women. We need to remind them to take their hats off, shake hands and use proper manners. These are life skills that will stay with them the rest of their lives.

Plus, the connection you make with junior golfers will circle back to you. Soon you will be teaching the mother, then the dad and ultimately his business clients. We need to really focus on helping people enjoy the game. Rather than tweaking launch angles down to the half-degree, we more need the mindset of hit it, go find it, hit it again.

What are you doing to develop young instructors?

First, I am looking for very polite, well-mannered associates, instructors who can help someone develop over a long period of time. I'm looking for someone who has the same passion for instruction that I have—people who are looking for a better way to say something and are willing to teach the player what they need to hear, not what they know.

How does that play out as you do your recruiting?

When we meet, I watch them give some instruction. After their student strikes the first shot of the session, I ask them: What did you see? Give me your journalistic view, in two to three words, what was not right? Inevitably, they will say they need to see more shots, they need more clues, I tell them the clues are right in front of you, what did you see? Simplify it and learn to see it right away.