

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.