

What I've Learned: Mike Barge

Hazeltine National G.C., Chaska, Minnesota

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



If a golf coach's reputation piques your interest, you can Google their name and quickly pick up information about their teaching approach and philosophy. This is certainly possible in the case of Mike Barge, longtime director of instruction at Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, Minn. It's complicated, however, because the search results are riddled with information on Barge's high-flying success as a tournament golfer. Articles about the five senior

majors Barge has participated in turn up repeatedly.

Among Mike's finest-ever days between the ropes came during second-round play of the 2006 Senior PGA Championship at Oak Tree Golf Club in Edmond, Okla. Barge, a Fargo, N.D. native, made a 12-footer on his final hole to card 32 coming in and post a 3-under par 68. That gave him a cut-making 36-hole score of 141 and a weekend of jousting with major-championship winners.

Since 1986, he has run the instruction program at Hazeltine. In that time, Barge has received many awards, including Minnesota PGA Teacher of the year twice. Six different times he has earned recognition as Top Teacher in Minnesota by the panel of experts at Golf Digest. Barge won the Minnesota State Open in 2006. He has been named Minnesota PGA Player of the Year and Senior Player of the Year. Proponent Group member and dedicated Q&A man Paul Ramee recently did some interview time with Mike and filed this transcript.

Over your career you've had a chance to stand in the bright lights, Mike. Apparently you started out in pretty quiet surroundings. Could you describe that?

I grew up in Fargo, N.D., and lived within walking distance of a golf course. My parents played and exposed me to golf early. By the time I was 14 or 15 I developed a love for the game. I played with other kids my age for a nickel or a dime a hole.

These days our grow-the-game programs come with instructions about reminding people the game should be enjoyable. It doesn't sound like you and those kids needed reminding.

We had so much fun. It was a pure experience. I had a chance to learn how to play the game of golf out on the actual golf course. There was access to formal instruction but I really didn't utilize it.

Lately our thinking on game-improvement focuses a lot on motor skills. Golf instructors talk about "repetitions" for their students. You had that opportunity, without the supervision.

The great thing about my experience of playing golf as a kid was that first, we had access to the golf course and second, we had a 9-hole par-3 golf course, with holes that ranged from 60 to 120 yards, we would go out with our wedges and putters and it was great short-game practice.

Interesting—your experience is what academies now are deliberately trying to replicate. How did you take advantage of the opportunity?

I played all through school and won the State High School Championship as a senior. I wanted to play college golf, but it had to be someplace warm. A kid who had graduated high school a year ahead of me was playing golf at a junior college in Odessa, Tex. He convinced me to come down and play on that team. I played in Odessa for two years and then moved on to Southern Methodist University.

What was your experience like at SMU?

I was fortunate to play on that team with Payne Stewart for a year. As my college career went on I knew my grades weren't going to get me into medical school so during my senior year when I was told about an opening at Moorehead Country Club, back in my hometown of Fargo, I applied for the position. I was hired and worked in the shop as well as in outside services. It was a five-year stint and it gave me my first exposure to teaching. After that I got a chance to move to Minneapolis Golf Club. I ended up working in the shop there, since the club did not have much of a range. I knew that I wanted to teach more. In 1986 I began teaching at Hazeltine and I have been there for 28 years.

Almost three decades at the same club—what's the recipe for making that work?

First, I love Hazeltine and I hope they love me. But for anyone to be successful at a private club for that long it has to be a fit for both sides. I love the club's commitment to hosting state, regional and national championships. I really admire the membership's adherence to the traditions of the game and their respect for the rules, playing without delay, respect for the golf course



Barge has been Hazeltine National's Director of Instruction for 28 years. He has been named the top teacher in Minnesota six times by Golf Digest.

and if possible walking the golf course. These core values are in line with my beliefs, so that is one of the reasons I believe it has worked out so well.

Those values you describe are what we hope would be universal in club golf—though it's not always the case.

When you have a group of people who are that passionate about their game and their club it tends to make the job easier. They have been great to me. They tend to want to get better and will do what I ask them to do. They really are willing to learn. Plus, it is an exciting place to work, what with all the championships. I have been around for the 1991 Open, 2002 and 2009 PGA Championships, a U.S. Amateur, a USGA State Team Championship and a USGA Mid-Am. To top it off we have the Ryder Cup coming here in 2016.

That's a high-profile club with a very active membership. Not exactly the sleepy kind of place that is ideal for a club professional who wants to keep his game tournament-sharp.

It has been hard to try and do both and the only way it works is if you work hard at both playing and teaching. Fortunately they both work hand in hand—that's how I view it. It's pretty important to be able to budget your time and make practicing a priority. For some reason, I have played my best golf after the age of 50. I am unsure whether it is technology, titanium, the ProV1, access to launch-monitor information, or just finally knowing what to work on after all these years.

How has the private club scene changed over the years?

It is more of a challenge now to attract members. This situation is not typical, as I've mentioned. Hazeltine is a special place so we are doing better than most and with the excitement around our championships we continue to attract quality members.

From a day-to-day standpoint, there is a huge time issue in families, the kids are playing other sports and being based in Minnesota we compete with Elite Hockey which is a 12-month deal. I wish more people would understand that golf is a lifelong sport and sports like hockey are not. Maybe with concussion issues coming to the forefront, more families will turn to golf.

Did you ever think about starting up your own academy?

Never very seriously, however if you look at how many Top 100 Teachers are at private clubs, it is probably less than 20 percent. But, I have never been handcuffed. I have been permitted to teach non-members and we have a huge junior program that continues to keep us very busy.

Also, we are close to breaking ground on a 9-hole "minimalist" golf course that will be great for our growth-of-the-game initiatives and the plan is to have a teaching building where we can teach 12 months of the year.

What have you been incorporating recently that has you and the members excited?

In 2011 we developed a new indoor teaching facility and we have been using a Foresight along with the Ping nFlight Program. We built an indoor putting green that allows us to offer a complete off-season practice plan.

What influences are driving your own learning recently?

I have been reading more and more about the mental and emotional side of the game, both for my students and myself. I have been focusing on Gio Valiente, Bob Rotella and Vision 54. Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott have a lot of good ideas that I have been incorporating into my coaching.

Can you talk about what you are doing in your winter facility?

The mentality of working in the winter is totally different than the work we do in the summer. It is good for making swing changes and while it is not as good as being outside, it is better than not working at all. We also work a lot on feel in the simulator. We have our competitive juniors learn how to hit a PW shorter distances. This is a club they will hit 125 or 150 yards. We want them to develop the feel associated with less than full shots.

What are your secrets for remaining at a club through so many different boards, golf chairmen and club presidents?

I have not really thought about it, but it's probably true that getting involved with someone's golf game is the best way to connect with a member. You are not going to form those relationships from selling a sweater or running a tournament. Not to disparage merchandising or tournament operations, but making a positive difference in someone's recreation time is meaningful.



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What advice would you offer to younger instructors?

I'll answer that by talking about a student of mine who is an NBA referee. One day in the grill room we were having lunch and a Hazeltine staff member introduced himself. This young man was interested in refereeing as a profession and requested advice. The answer he got was to make sure he could "pass the eye test." But not like in a doctor's office—this "eye test" has to do with looking the part. For whatever he or she wants to do, a young person has to look the part, both in the way they dress and in the way they organize their teaching stations.

Second, they need to always be ready for a big opportunity. You never know who your next lesson is going to be. You could have a young junior come to you with immense talent and you could have the opportunity to lead him through the development stages. Also, try not to neglect your own game. It is important to be able to play and relate to your students. Be a good listener, let the students talk to you and tell you what they are feeling.

Lastly, develop your own style and develop different ways to get your point across. Personally I try and use fewer words. Some simple, minimal words that I will use include "slower," "faster," "taller," and so forth. This approach helps me keep my students' thoughts to a minimum.