

What I've Learned: Michael Breed

Manhattan Woods G.C., West Nyack, NY

Interview by Paul Ramee, Jr.



Proponent member Michael Breed is known by millions of avid golfers around the world as host of The Golf Fix on Golf Channel. But a lot of people don't know that he has been a long-time Head Professional in the Met Section at Sunningdale C.C. at the same time he has been doing television.

Only this year is he moving away from his Head Professional duties to open his own golf academy at Manhattan Woods G.C. in West Nyack, NY. After watching him on The Golf Fix you know he has a lot of energy, which he displayed in a lengthy conversation with our Paul Ramee. This issue contains Part 1 of a two-part Q & A article, which concludes next month.

Proponent Group: We know without asking, from watching you on TV, that enthusiasm was a major impetus for your career's steeply upward path. What else should we know about how you arrived at your present plateau?

Michael Breed: I started out in golf the way a lot of people do—doing basic outside work at a golf facility. For me that was cleaning the range at the Jupiter Island Club, where I reported to Head Professional Gil Cavanaugh. My summer job was working for Head Professional Ken McDonald at the Dorset Field Club in Vermont. I was intent on playing for a living, then I got an assistant professional position at Birchwood Country Club in Connecticut. What came next was an assistant professional position at Augusta National Golf Club. Imagine that—you work at a nine-hole club, then another nine-hole club, then you get hired at Augusta National. There is no knowing what is on the road to success, as somebody once said.

You also had the planets line up nicely for you in getting hired at the Deepdale Club, isn't that true?

Prior to working at Augusta, when I was an assistant pro at Birchwood, I was paired in the last group of the Assistant's Championship with Darrell Kestner and Rick Meskell. Some years after that I'm on the phone with Executive Director Charlie Robson at the Metropolitan PGA Section, talking about career steps I'm trying to take. He responds that there is an incredible opportunity at Deepdale, where Darrell Kestner is looking for a teaching assistant. Darrell is going to try and play more and this position is just coming open. So I am fortunate that Darrell re-

members me from when we played in the assistant's championship and I get the job and stay there for four years.

We're guessing that you found your way into your television work through a similar mix of initiative and good timing—a correct assumption?

Pretty much. As I mentioned, I would end up at Birchwood, in Fairfield County, Connecticut, where I moved up to become head professional. One day I was teaching a guy who had played at Wake Forest and had not broken 80 in a long time. Within three lessons he shot a 69. Here comes another great stroke of luck, this student of mine roomed with a guy who worked at the Golf Channel in college.

So, I get set up to work Golf Academy Live during the Masters. Of course, having been an assistant at Augusta, this is a natural. So, Wednesday of the Masters, I am supposed to do two segments of Golf Academy Live and end up doing three. I am sitting next to Mark Lye and they ask us who is going to win. I tell them a foreign player will take the jacket and Lye responds that I must be nuts, but it was like I saw it before it was going to happen. This was the first year of the second cut of rough and I knew it would take someone who could flight the ball correctly out of the second cut. So, Olazabal wins and the Golf Channel has me back on Sunday night at 9 p.m. and thanks to my prediction I am suddenly a genius. It was such blind luck, I was so

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- Michael Breed



nervous and if my conversation with Mark Lye had not been so animated, I probably would not have had so much conviction.

Within a month the Golf Channel calls me and asks me if I had ever done any on course commentary. I tell them “sure,” and it's more or less a true answer. That's because as golf pros, we have all done it in our head, just maybe not with a microphone with people listening. So, I did six shows in 2000 and that same year I won the Met Section Teacher of the Year. Not a bad year, as I look back.

How did “The Fix” come to be?

I had the idea for a golf instruction show on Cable and I had created a business plan for the idea and shot a pilot. The business plan showed that if we shot 13 30-minute shows and sold all the advertising, we could make revenue of \$7 million. I even had a name for it, “The New Breed of Golf.” Unfortunately, the guys I had entered into the plan with had different ideas.

So in 2002 the Golf Channel asked me for three ideas for shows. I gave them two in-brief ideas and I gave them the pilot I shot in 1997 for “The New Breed of Golf.” They told me it was too MTV-ish, too fast-paced. The producer thanked me for submitting the tape and put it in a desk drawer. Now, fast forward to 2008, Golf Channel is searching for new ideas, my disk is pulled out of the desk and the Golf Channel loves it and it becomes the model for how Golf Channel is going to do instruction going forward. If you remember, they had slowed down their instruction offerings in the mid-2000s, but they were rethinking that concept.

How does this work with Sunningdale?

Another amazing twist. It goes back to September of 2008 and the Bernie Madoff affair. We are a New York City-based club with a lot of members who have invested with Madoff. The damage is pretty deep and we are likely to lose a chunk of our membership. Our GM comes to me and tells me I need to reduce my budget, which essentially means I need to cut payroll and our service will take a hit. I think about it and tell him that I would be willing to reduce my salary in exchange for Tuesdays off so I can shoot my show with the Golf Channel throughout the year. This turns out to be a win for the club because service does not suffer. So everyone won. Fortunately, the show is an immediate success.

What were your thoughts, as you realized that the threat to your club job wasn't really going to materialize, meanwhile your status as a teaching professional on a major cable network was rising quickly?

In retrospect, I was prepared for the opportunity when it came along. I don't think I'm particularly unique. Lots of guys are prepared, they just don't necessarily get the break I got.

Based on what you've achieved, you could be giving us a lot more ego. It seems like you're able to keep things in perspective—how do you go about that?

Very easy. I used to drive on Interstate 95 every day to work and when I got off the exit I would see a man holding a sign that said “I Need Money for Food.” The first time I saw him, I rolled up my window and locked my door. Second time, the same thing. Third time, same deal. Eventually I am timing my path down the off-ramp so I don't have to stop at the light and make eye contact with the guy. Then I start thinking about what is going on at the top of this exit ramp. I mean, I get to where I'm thinking about this guy when I'm 10 miles from the exit, then 15 miles, then

right when I'm leaving my house. Then I start thinking about his life, how did he get there?

Was there an alternate route you could have taken?

This guy being on that ramp every day was something I took as a message to me. One day, I handed the guy three dollars. For some reason that felt amazing. I got to where I looked forward to seeing this guy. It made me feel good to help him. So I continued to think about him, how did he get to where he is? Did he have a learning disability? Did his parents die when he was young? Either way, this is where he is, he didn't ask for it, but he has a lot of courage to stand out there and ask for money, lots of people would just resort to taking money from people in his situation. But this is why I remain humble, never in this guy's dreams did he expect he would end up along the off ramp of an I-95 exit, asking for money for food. Meanwhile, there I am living my

dream of being a head professional and I get to live that dream every day. I have to remain humble, because if you don't, you really have a problem. Second, the people I have had in my life, my father, my mother, Darrell Kestner, Augusta National's Head Professional David Spencer, they have touched my life, motivated me to chase my dreams. None of us knows how fortunate we really are.



Mike Breed successfully juggles his time between students and Golf Channel.

You have a knack for getting things done, beyond just the daily punch list of to-do items. Big accomplishments involving big challenges have been part of your resume.

I go back to that idea of “motion with direction.” At the same time I think about what to me is a big life question: What kind of person do you want to be? Do you want to be a person who delivers what he or she says they are going to deliver? I would recommend to others that if they have a desire to accomplish a large task, find someone who is doing what you want to do and then ask them how they did it. If that general advice isn't getting through I might explain to them about the remora, which is a fish that essentially lives off the back of a great white shark. A remora's livelihood is based on the food by-product a shark creates. So, I tell people all the time to be a remora. In other words, it is OK to ask others how they accomplished their various goals and then go out and do the same.

Logistically, how did you go about it, working part-time in Orlando and part-time in New York?

It was exhausting, both physically and emotionally. There are 62 days in July and August and this year I worked 59 of them. When you film a show, it can be draining, you need to have enough content to fill an hour and that creates pressure. Plus, we have 30 people working on the show and if I am not at my best and the show is not successful and the show gets cancelled, these people could be out of work. They are relying on me to be at my best to continue the success of the show.

Part II will be in the February COLLABORATE newsletter.